AFEHRI File 19-5-2-3

Research Materials/Source Documents
AWARDS & DECORATIONS

FILE TITLE: SSgt Henry Eugene Erwin, Medal of Honor Recipient - WW II

Reviewed by:

AFEHRI Representative G R. Akin **date** 11 Dec 97

EPC Representative [signature] **date** 28 Jan 98

Scanner Operator [signature] **date** 4 Feb 98

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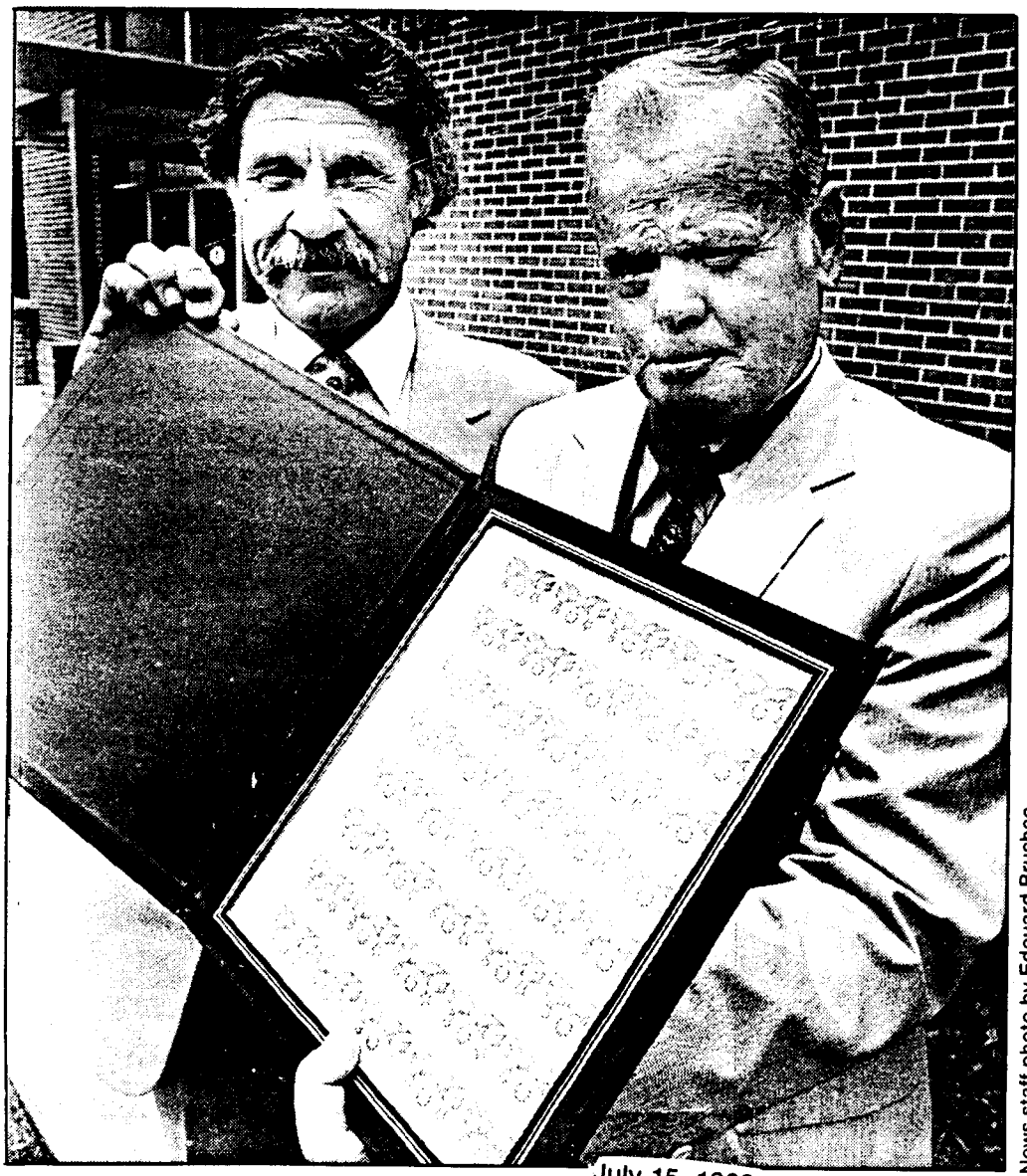


News staff photo by Edouard Bruchac

July 15, 1983

Medal of Honor winner honored

Henry E. "Red" Erwin received a sheet of World War II commemorative stamps from Postmaster Jack Lambert during a ceremony Wednesday. Erwin, right, was one of 114 World War II Medal of Honor recipients honored this month as the U.S. Postal Service introduced a new stamp commemorating World War II heroes. Erwin earned the Medal of Honor during the war while flying over Japan. Erwin, a native of Fairfield Highlands, has lived in Leeds five years.

Henry E. Erwin

Born May 8, 1921 - Jefferson County Alabama
Enlisted Army Air Corps on July 27, 1942 -
Discharged October 8, 1947 - Rank of Master
Sgt. Seven Medals including Medal of Honor
Hospitalized 2 1/2 years prior to discharge -
41 plastic surgery operations.
Veterans administration employee from January
4, 1948 to April 3, 1985 - Veterans Benefits
Counselor.

Married to Martha Stories in 1944.
Four Children - Six Grandchildren.

(almost forgot - flew 17 missions
against the Japs)

Red Erwin
A Forgotten Hero Revisited

His gallantry in World War II was "above and beyond";
today his love for God and country is no less.

By Burr Ingram
Associate Editor

A few weeks ago I spent the best part of a morning with a man I had never met. Worse, he was a man I had never heard of. His name was Henry Eugene (Red) Erwin, a name I suspect is as unfamiliar to you as it was to me. The story of Red Erwin, like so many others, has been a victim of that most effective eraser, time. Almost 30 years ago he was one of the real super heroes of World War II. The feat he performed was so heroic that it earned for him the nation's ultimate decoration, the Medal of Honor.

April 12, 1945 is a day Erwin will never forget. A force of 66 giant B-29 bombers took off from Saipan on a combat mission, the target a high octane gasoline production plant near Korima, Japan. Aboard one of the planes was Staff Sgt. Red Erwin, a radio operator/ gunner from Bessemer, Alabama. He recalls that day vividly.

"It was my 11th mission over Japan. We were flying low just off the coast of Japan when we started assembling for the run over the target," Erwin said. "Because of our heavy bomb load we always flew very low to conserve fuel until we reached the target. We were carrying five tons of demolition bombs in addition to clusters of incendiary bombs."

These smaller bombs, fire bombs they are called, were about 12 inches long, four and one-half inches in diameter, weighed three or four pounds, and when detonated reached a scorching temperature of 1,300 degrees.

"Somehow an air pocket we hit caused one of these cluster bombs to fire up into the plane and explode. It knocked me to the floor and burned my ear off immediately. The phosphorous smoke filled the plane and caused the pilot to lose control of the plane," Erwin said.

At that point Red Erwin performed a deed which undoubtedly was "above and beyond the call of duty." In fact, today it seems incomprehensible. With the bomb lying at his side and a blinding smoke in his eyes he picked up the 1,300 degree-burning bomb in his left hand, crawled to the pilot's compartment thirty feet away and threw it out the window into the Pacific Ocean, only some 300 feet below. In doing so he saved 11 fellow crewmen from a fiery death.

"I just remember that they always told us in training . . . and I've told my boy . . . not to panic. Keep your presence of mind and know what's going on. That way you always have an escape possibility. I asked the good Lord to help me and hollered to the pilot to open his window. That thirty feet seemed like eternity."

Most assuredly the mission was aborted and they headed for the nearest hospital at Iwo Jima. Erwin, suffering agonizing pain, was conscious during the return flight. "They gave me so much morphine

I told them they were going to kill me."

Erwin, then 24-years-old, recalled an incident at the Iwo hospital. "I was only there for a day or so. I remember hearing a lot of very sad music while I was in bed. Quite frankly, I wasn't sure that angels weren't coming for me. But then someone told me President Roosevelt had died and then I knew they were not coming for me then."

But if Erwin was sure he was going to live, very few others shared his confidence. One of those who did not was the new President of the United States, Harry Truman, who had taken office on the same day of Erwin's heroic feat. When Truman was told of Erwin's action, he cut through a bale of red tape and ordered that the Medal of Honor — the nation's ultimate decoration — be presented to Erwin immediately. Truman was determined that this young Alabamian receive the medal before his death.

The situation was complicated when it was learned there was not a Medal of Honor anywhere near Guam, where Erwin was hospitalized. The closest one was halfway across the Pacific at Pearl Harbor in a showcase. And that was the Medal of Honor presented to Red Erwin. The showcase was broken into, the coveted decoration was removed and flown immediately to the "dying" Erwin. On April 19 the decoration was presented to a heavily bandaged and totally unaware Red Erwin. No American in history had received the nation's highest honor so quickly.

For the next two and a half years hospitals were his home. After returning to the U.S. in May of 1945, Erwin was hospitalized for a year in Northington General Hospital in Tuscaloosa, six months in Cushing General Hospital in Massachusetts and 13 months in Valley Forge Hospital. Finally, in October, 1947, after 37 plastic surgery operations Red Erwin decided he was "ready to go home."

Now 53, Erwin knows full well how close to death he came on that day in April almost 30 years ago.

"I know I am lucky to be alive. I also know that if you don't have the will and determination to live, then it really doesn't matter how good the doctor is," Erwin said. Red Erwin had that will and determination.

It seems appropriate that Erwin has spent the past 27 years work-

ERWIN

ERWIN IN 1944

ing with the Veterans Administration in Birmingham. As chief of the Veterans Assistance Office, he is obviously doing what he likes to do.

"I really enjoy my work. There is deep satisfaction in helping veterans, young and old, with their problems," he said. "I'm here at the office every morning at 5:45 a.m. to catch up on my paperwork. You can also do a lot of good thinking then."

He and his wife, the former Martha Starnes, are deeply religious and a great joy to them is that one of their four children is preparing to enter the ministry.

Another thing about this remarkable man, who may be badly scarred on the outside but not at all scarred on the inside — he is a very proud and grateful American.

"We have a lot of problems in this country, but we should never forget how fortunate we really are. I thank God I was born an American. We have been blessed in so many ways. It reminds me of that passage in the Bible: 'To whom much is given, much is expected.' "

HENRY ERWIN

1945-

THROUGH HELL IN A B-29

The pain was so bad he wanted to give up, but 'God's angel' kept urging him on

SGT. HENRY ERWIN thought he knew something about heat. As a teenager, he had rolled slabs of fiery metal down to thin sheets in an Alabama steel mill. But that was before he inched his way through hell in a B-29 and gave new meaning to the term "heroism above and beyond the call of duty."

Being a hero was the last thing on Erwin's mind when his "City of Los Angeles" left Guam April 12, 1945, on its 17th bombing run over Japan. With victory almost in sight, the 23-year-old radio operator simply wanted to get the war over. This night, he was to send out a phosphorus smoke flare that would signal to a group of

trailing B-29s that they were approaching their target. As Koriyama neared, Erwin triggered the flare and dropped it down a tube. There was a malfunction. The flare bounced back into the plane and hit him in the face.

In a flash, Red Erwin's red hair was gone. So, too, were his nose and the right side of his face, including an ear and an eye. The other eye was sightless. He knew that within seconds the white-hot flare would eat its way to the bomb bay and blow to bits the B-29 and its 11-man crew.

BIRMINGHAM NEWS

SERGEANT. *After saving his crew, Erwin helped thousands of veterans.*

He groped for the flare, grabbed it and crawled toward the cockpit. A table blocked his way. With one hand, he hugged the flare to his chest. With the other, he lifted the table, leaving behind the skin of his entire hand. "The pain was so terrible," he said later, "I just wanted to give up and say, 'Lord, have mercy on me.' But God's angel was in there, and he kept saying, 'Go. Go. Go.' "

Erwin kept going, and finally reached the cockpit. With smoke hiding the instrument panel, the plane had gone into a dive, and Capt. Tony Simeral had opened a window to clear the air. Erwin uttered three words—"Pardon me, sir" —reached across the pilot and tossed the flare out the window. Then he collapsed. The phosphorus coating his body continued burning even after he was drenched with a fire extinguisher. The B-29 pulled up 300 feet above the ocean. Erwin remained conscious throughout a 3-hour trip to Iwo Jima but spoke only once. "Is everybody else all right, sir?" he asked.

No one expected Erwin to live long. Officers familiar with his deed wasted no time: They typed up the facts, woke Gen. Curtis LeMay for his signature and wired a Medal of Honor recommendation to Washington. Approval came back in record time, and a B-29 flew to Hawaii to fetch the nearest medal. Erwin received it while bandaged from head to toe. The 10 men he saved stood by his bedside.

Red Erwin's hair is now white. His wife, Betty, stood by him during 43 operations that gave him a nose, an ear and vision in one eye. He fathered four kids and, as a Veterans Administration counselor in Birmingham, helped thousands who "gave as much as I did." The lesson he learned is that freedom is not cheap. "More than a million people have died to keep this country free. Those are the heroes. Not me. I'm alive."

Incredible Heroism In A Crucible of Fire

by John W. Syler

When Major General Willis Hale stood beside the bed of Henry "Red" Erwin, to pin the Medal of Honor on the only B-29 air-crewman to win the award in World War II, all those gathered at his bedside fully expected "Red" to perish shortly from his terrible wounds. In fact, no one could understand how he'd lived as long as he had.

He was swathed from head to toe in thick layers of gray bandages and the medal had been pinned to those bandages. General Curtis LeMay had rushed through the medal in just five weeks, so it could be presented to him alive instead of posthumously.

Red's story began on April 12, 1945, when pilot Captain G.A. (Tony) Simeral taxied their plane, *City of Los Angles,* down the runway and took off on a bombing mission to attack Koriyama, northeast of Tokyo, which supplied chemicals and badly needed petrol to the Imperial forces. Though the enemy was not expected to muster much in the way of fighter opposition, there was a copious amount of antiaircraft protection in the area. Accompanying the crew was Col. Eugene Strouse, commander of the 52nd Bombardment Squadron, along as an observer.

Hunched over his radio gear, Erwin made himself as comfortable as possible for the long trip to the target. He had enlisted in the Army Air Corps shortly after the outbreak of the war and had been one of the first airmen to fly the four-engine B-29s in the final air assault against Japan. Many crewmen came to hate the craft because of its difficult

Red Erwin

"teething" problems, but Red loved the B-29, because he hated wearing oxygen gear and the 29's cabin was pressurized.

The *City* was lead aircraft, or pathfinder for the mission, which meant that it would give the signal at the initial point, or IP, for the beginning of the bomb run. One of Erwin's duties was to drop the signal flares, indicating the assembly point, then a phosphorus smoke bomb at the IP. The phosphorus canister was a 20 pound steel cylinder with a six second fuse, and was to have been dropped through a circular release pipe. It would fall perhaps 300 feet before exploding, making a clear rallying point in the center of the sky, from which point the other B-29s would begin their runs on Koriyama. It was at about this time that they were jumped by a "Nick" fighter. At the same time, four "Zekes" were spied coming at them from the port beam. Simeral kept the *City* level, not attempting to zig-zag, because that maneuver only made things easier for their attackers.

Erwin was approaching the rack containing the flares and the phosphorus bomb, when they crossed the Japanese coast. The fighters were continuing their airborne harassment, and now flak bursts were exploding beneath them. The B-29 lurched for a minute and Erwin fell to the floor, uttering a faint curse, he regained his feet, grabbed his flares and the bomb and stood next to the release pipe waiting for the drop signal from Simeral, Co-Pilot Lt. Roy Stables, or Col. Strouse.

Captain Simeral raised his arm and looked back. Calmly, Erwin dropped his parachute flares through the release pipe. The flares made clunking noises as they dropped through the pipe and exploded far below the plane. The pilots of the other aircraft now had their eyes fixed on the lead plane, and awaited the phosphorus flare to signal the beginning of their bomb run. Erwin, no longer encumbered by his earphones, picked up the signal bomb. His fingers moved assuredly over the steel case of the device, finding the fuse and setting it. Holding the bomb over the release pipe, he allowed it

to slip from his hand.

What happened next was an unpredictable fluke, the kind of thing that can work fine in dozens of other instances, but this time did not; and in fact, went terribly, horribly wrong. No one knows precisely what went wrong, or if it was anyone's fault. Perhaps at the precise moment, the aircraft hit an air pocket, but the upshot of it was, that the bomb refused to fall through the gate at the bottom of the pipe. After a split-second bounce, it exploded, throwing white-hot flames back into Erwin's face. Then it came back up, flying out of the release tube and into the airplane, hurtling at an unbelievable speed and burning at a temperature of 1300 degrees Fahrenheit! Sergeant Erwin's 15 second ordeal had begun!

The blazing phosphorus whirled around the inside of the B-29, like a meteor gone berserk. Ricocheting off the curved roof of the plane, it bombarded Erwin with its searing heat. His nose was burned off and the putrid smell or scorched flesh filled the cabin. In seconds the whole upper portion of the sergeant's body was charred. He fell backward, his arms waving, thrown off balance and dazed by the beginning of his ordeal. The device finally came to a stop on the floor of the plane; there it fizzed and burned, only feet away from 6000 pounds of incendiary bombs in the main bay.

Erwin recovered his senses and balance. Groggy from the searing pain of his wounds, he worked his way toward the bomb which, in addition to the terrible fire, was filling the cabin with a choking, thick white cloud of smoke. His eyes were covered with blisters, limiting his vision to a dim blur. His life jacket and shirt had been mostly burned away and beneath, the skin of his shoulders and chest was on fire!

Erwin had almost reached the hellish device, when the *City of Los Angeles* suddenly fell away beneath his feet and he was slammed into his own radio desk. The pilot and co-pilot had been overcome by the billowing, acrid smoke and had temporarily lost control of the aircraft. It was plummeting earthward at a 60° angle. Just as Simeral regained control of the aircraft, pulling out of the dive, Erwin found the bomb with his fingers. He scooped-up the projectile and held it, disregarding the third degree burns that roasted him from the waist up, and ignoring the spoutstream of blood flying from where his nose had been.

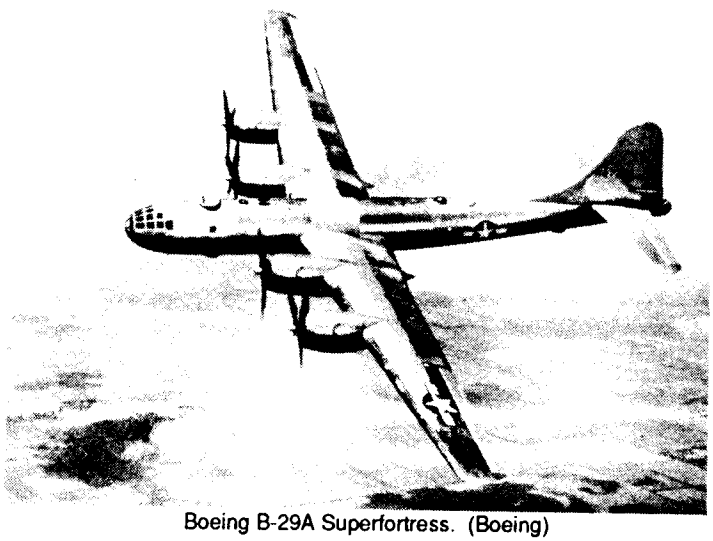
Erwin began limping forward with the flaming bomb, moving it away from the bomb bay where the bigger bombs lay. He was coughing, crying and spraying blood all over the inside of the smoke filled B-29. Yet somehow he managed to retain a hold on the phosphorus device, which was burning his fingers and forearms down to the bone! Flames licked at the soles of his shoes, as his trousers were now aflame as well. And beneath all this hell, was the pungent odor of seared flesh.

Simeral yelled, "Out the window! Get it out the window!"

Momentarily losing his balance, as he made his way forward, kicking his way through a jungle of aeronautical equipment, he tottered into the forward cabin, where Simeral, Strouse and Stables were trying to reach him.

"Open the window!" Erwin's voice shrieked in terrible pain. He staggered into the copiolot who was gesturing in the direction of the right window and trying to help him. Stables pointed, then yelled, then reached for the white-hot bomb himself, as Erwin found the window, hurled the bomb through it and collapsed on the floor of the bomber.

Simeral turned the bomber away from the target, while another B-29 took its place for the strike against Koriyama. Everything having to do with the raid was forgotten now for the bomber's crew thought their radio man was dying an agonizing death. Sending their bombs into the empty ocean, Simeral poured on the coals to get Erwin to Iwo Jima, which had the nearest airfield where help might be obtained for him. Col. Strouse and Lt. Stables sprayed him with fire extinguishers until they were sure the flames were doused. Sgt. Curphey injected him in the arm with morphine. Erwin lay on his



Boeing B-29A Superfortress. (Boeing)

back moaning at first, then shrieking deep throaty cries of agony.

Simeral yelled for someone to get on the radio and advise Iwo that they were bringing in a Mayday. "Hey!" Erwin yelled. "That's my job!"

Curphey yelled: "He's talking. How are you, Red?"

"I -don't -know-"

"Hang on buddy, hang on."

"Plasma," another crewman said, "He's lost a lot of blood. Needs Plasma."

"Who's the medical specialist on this bird?"

"He is, darnit, he is."

Lying hunched on his back muscles, Erwin grimaced, but had stopped yelling. He forced himself to talk, allowing the words to come out slowly and painfully, instructing another crew member on how to give a plasma injection. An awkward affair because the airplane was being buffeted by mid-Pacific turbulence, it was at last accomplished. Then they sat and stood around Erwin, trying to make him comfortable injecting more morphine and trying to say something to him to convince him he would live.

Erwin lay there, relieved that he had saved the plane and his buddies, yet suffering more agonizing pain than most men ever experience. He rested his eyes on the ceiling, struggled to remain calm and wondered why he could not mercifully lose consciousness.

He never did. For 600 air miles, almost two hours aloft, he lay there with stabbing pain wracking his whole body. He not only endured it, but made a half-hearted attempt to smile at his fellow fliers!

The *City of Los Angeles* dropped toward Iwo Jima in the midst of a raging air battle. A surprise raid by Japanese "Betty" bombers had begun a few minutes earlier, and friend and foe were battling each other over the island. Once again Capt. Simeral had to fly through a swarm of enemy aircraft without taking evasive action.

500th BG B-29s drop their lethal loads of incendiaries on another Japanese city. (USAAF)

The *City* hit on the coral runway gracelessly, bouncing hard, as its three main wheels struck at an awkward angle, then tearing forward to a sudden neck-breaking stop.

Crash wagons met the aircraft at the end of the runway, and corpsmen removed Erwin from the smoke-blackened interior. His mates went with him to the hospital, ignoring the air-battle going on above them, and disregarding the fact that they were supposed to be debriefed.

For the next few days, Erwin was inspected by every doctor on the island, and given every anesthetic in the Iwo Jima hospital. He received whole-blood transfusions, internal surgery and skin grafts. Nevertheless for several days, though conscious most of the time, he lay on the brink of death. Almost every inch of his body from the waist up had suffered third degree burns, while lesser burns seared his legs. He had lost a frightening amount of blood; and the traumatic shock of the ordeal had left him deeply stunned.

After days of doubt, Sgt. Henry "Red" Erwin pulled through. Five weeks later, when he received his Medal of Honor, he was still wrapped in bandages—but he had survived.

General Curtis LeMay, commander of B-29 operations in the Marianas, said to him "Your efforts to save the lives of your fellow airmen is the most extraordinary kind of heroism I know."

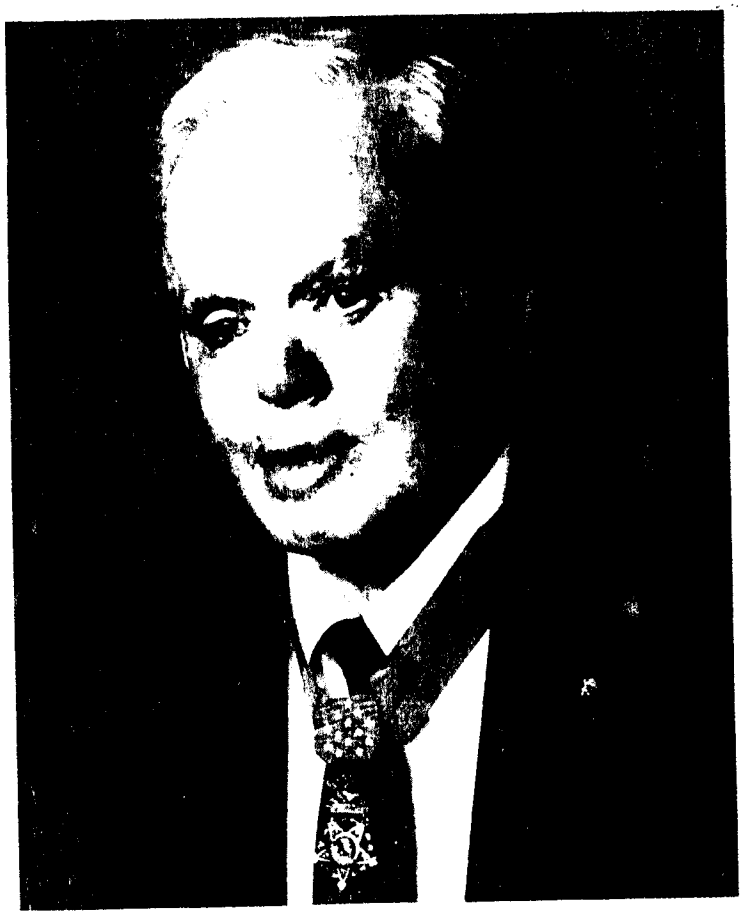
The mission against Koriyama was a resounding success. The 52nd Bombardment Squadron had struck with apparent vengeance, resulting in severe damage to the chemical plant.

Sgt. Erwin had to fight another battle with the same courage and fortitude that had saved his plane from immolation: He endured the agony of forty-one major plastic surgery operations. Later, when he went to work for the U.S. Veterans' Administration, he had to fight down nausea each time he smelled ether while entering a VA hospital. He continued making those visits though, because he felt a kinship with the vets in the burn wards: "I knew the agony and pain they went through... It's indescribable. If I live to be a hundred, I'll never forget it. The Pain."

Enlisted Medal of Honor recipient Red Erwin heroically walked through the valley by saving his aircrew and emerged . . .

From the Shadows of Death

by George E. Hicks
Director, Airmen Memorial Museum

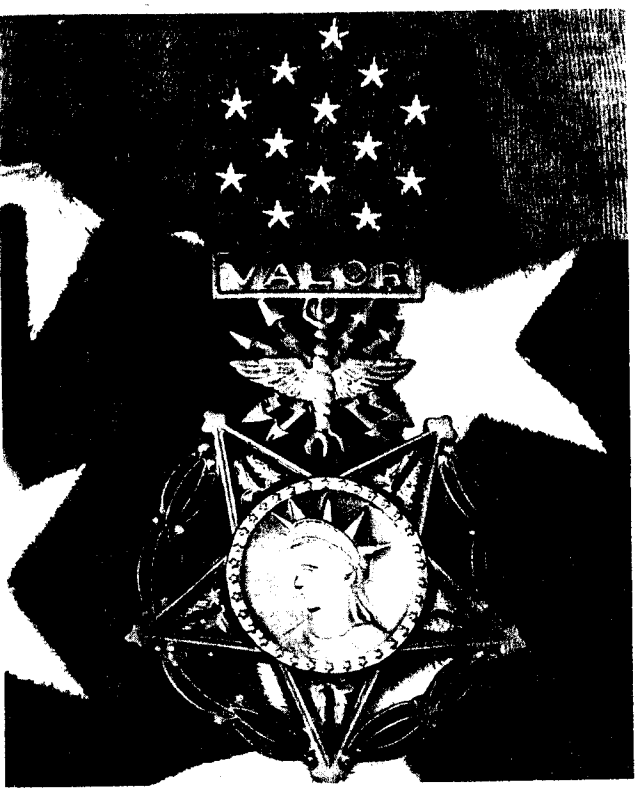


Today, Henry "Red" Erwin is 44 years older than Army physicians predicted he would be. It is a reflection of their medical skills, the young man's will to live and his firm conviction in a good and righteous God.

In the summer of 1942, Henry Eugene Erwin joined the Enlisted Reserve Corps of the United States Army. He was one of five Erwin brothers, serving in three branches of the military, loaned to this nation to combat the Axis Powers during World War II.

Red Erwin's pre-combat training was extensive. Frustrated in his efforts as an aviation cadet, he was transferred to Radio Operator and Mechanic School at Sioux Falls, S.D., and received additional technical training at Traux Field near Madison, Wis. In February 1945, he departed the continental United States with the 52nd Bombardment Group for duty in the Asiatic-Pacific Theater of Operations. It was duty that neither he nor his fellow crewmen would ever forget.

In the spring of that year, virtually all of arsenal America was aimed at the nation of Japan and its outlying island fortresses in the Pacific. By April, military planners had begun a concerted attack on the Japanese homeland. They chose long range bombing and the comparatively new Boeing B-29 Superfortress as the instrument of war. Priority targets included Japanese factories that manufactured airplanes, aircraft engines, chemicals for munitions and the navigable approaches to the Nippon island harbors. Facto-



Forty-four years after carrying a white-hot phosphorescent bomb out of a B-29 and saving its crew when he was a staff sergeant, Henry "Red" Erwin (First page) still proudly wears the Army Medal of Honor presented to him by General Curtis LeMay. The modern-day Air Force version is depicted to the left.

ries within the cities were located in clusters as a result of the limited amount of real estate available for manufacturing. The cities and their industrial sites were heavily defended by enormous concentrations of anti-aircraft guns. Indeed, the flak was pure hell.

At that point in the war, the Japanese high command recognized that they were in a "do or die" effort to defend their homeland. As a result, they threw every conceivable military weapon at the approaching allies. During April and May of 1945 there were no less than 1,700 missions flown by desperate Japanese kamikaze (suicide) pilots. The youthful, frenzied aviators aimed their aircraft at enemy bombers and naval vessels in hopes of turning back the allied advance.

Yet, night after night the B-29's attacked. That terrible spring of 1945 saw more than 145,000 tons of bombs — fully 75% of which were incendiary devices — fall on the Emperor's homeland. Erwin himself was an enlisted witness to the attacks.

On March 9th and 10th, he participated in the historic low-level bombing attacks on Tokyo. In those darkened hours, more than 270 B-29s, flying in 200-foot increments at altitudes of 4,900 to 9,200 feet, pounded Tokyo with incendiary devices. The young staff sergeant was a silent witness as 17 square miles of the city, and in excess of 267,000 buildings, were set ablaze. Ultimately, more than 100 square miles of Japanese cities and countless lives were lost as the Asian nation considered their inevitable defeat.

The American strategy was designed to beat the enemy into submission, both physically and psychologically. Expensive combat experiences throughout the Pacific Theater had proven the Japanese to be tenacious fighters and determined defenders. The options then were to bomb the enemy into submission or to invade Japan. Even if such an invasion proved successful, it would, inevitably, be catastrophic and costly in terms of human life.

The Superfortress bombing runs were one of the wartime risks undertaken by an innovative leadership and executed by a rare breed of men. Each of the bombing attacks were launched at night and at low level, to capitalize on a weak or inefficient Japanese radar. For maximum efficiency, the bombers were stripped of guns, ammunition and "non essential" crewmen. The weight gained was given over to fuel and bombs. And, there was no fighter escort!

On April 12, 1945, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt died. That same day, SSgt. Henry "Red" Erwin defied death and gave new life to his fellow crew members.

That evening, Red Erwin served as

SSgt. "Red" Erwin battled death and suffered severe phosphorous burns in an Iwo Jima hospital after saving his fellow B-29 crewmembers.

the radio operator for the lead ship in a formation of B-29's approaching the chemical plants of Koriyama, Japan. One of his assignments required that he trigger and drop phosphorescent flare bombs to signal other ships in the formation. As the aircraft approached the target, the navigator moved from his table to assist with the bombing run and SSgt. Erwin moved to the flare chute. As he knelt over the opening in the deck, he began to trigger the signal bombs when one of the arming devices proved faulty. The bomb ignited prematurely and was propelled back into the aircraft, striking the young staff sergeant in the face. Smoke immediately filled the aircraft, obscuring the pilot's vision, as the 1,300-degree white heat of the flare began to burn its way through the floor of the aircraft.

Already in intense pain, Sergeant Erwin had enough presence of mind to recognize that the entire ship — already in a steep dive — was doomed without some form of help. At that moment, Erwin picked up the burning flare and began to work his way toward the front of the aircraft so he could jettison the bomb.

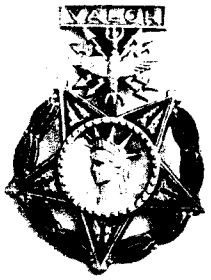
As he stumbled toward the cockpit, he found the navigator's table was still in place. Even as the flames engulfed him, he maintained his grasp on the bomb, holding it between his right arm and chest. Working with one hand, he freed the table from its down and locked position to continue toward the co-pilot's window where he was able to discard the burning projectile. With the smoke clearing, the pilot immediately recovered his vision and pulled out of the near fatal dive at 300 feet above the ocean. Only then did Red Erwin collapse in pain and fatigue. Grateful and anxious crewmen rushed to his side to extinguish the flames that engulfed him. He never lost consciousness and had presence of mind enough to inquire about the safety of his fellow crewmen.

The pilot of the B-29, Captain George Simeral, made as direct a return to Iwo Jima as humanly possible. The medical teams rushed the young staff sergeant into treatment, though none of them expected the young man to live. All that night, the officers of the crew and of headquarters worked furiously, to compose a recommendation for the Medal of Honor.

As "Red" Erwin hovered near death, the Army bureaucracy moved with uncharacteristic efficiency — a one-page citation was finally agreed upon. General Curtis LeMay was awakened to read and approve it. The document was "flashed to Washington" and approved within days. Working against time and Erwin's delicate medical condition, the Army officials sought and found a Medal of Honor for presentation in Honolulu, Hawaii. A special B-29 was ordered for the mission. The crew rushed to pick up the medal, only to find the case locked and the key missing. Without spending much time to look for the key, the glass was smashed, the medal retrieved and sent on its way to Sergeant Erwin's bedside. There, in the Iwo Jima hospital, General Curtis LeMay presented the nation's highest award for gallantry in action little more than one week after the act that saved the lives of the B-29 crew.

Immobile and swathed in bandages, "Red" Erwin uttered a characteristically humble "Thank you, Sir." When the General asked if there was anything else he would like, Sergeant Erwin said, "Yes, Sir. I would like to see my brother again. He is a Marine, serving with the Second Marine Division on Saipan." The next day, Lance Corporal Howard Erwin was given 24 hours to spend at his brother's bedside.

In the more than 45 years that have elapsed since that fateful night over Koriyama, "Red" Erwin has continued to serve his fellow man and his God. He endured almost three years of hospitalization and dozens of operations. After he was discharged as a master sergeant in 1947, he served more than 30 years as a counselor with the Veterans Administration. Today, this quiet, humble Alabamian enjoys the company of Martha, his wife of 45 years, and takes pride in his son, who is an ordained minister, and three daughters. He has four grandsons and three granddaughters.



The Medal and its History

By December 1861, The U.S. had suffered through eight long months of Civil War. Low morale, disciplinary problems and short-term enlistments had caused grave problems for the Federal forces.

In an effort to rebuild morale, the U.S. Navy submitted a resolution to Congress which requested that an emblematic device be created and " . . . given to enlisted sailors who display heroism during the current rebellion."

The U.S. Army later created its own version, but also extended eligibility to enlisted men. Today's Air Force version has been awarded to five enlisted airmen.

The device created by both would be forever known as the Medal of Honor.

AFSA Honors an Enlisted Hero

Henry "Red" Erwin (L) is recognized with the AFSA Citation of Honor from AFSA International President CMSgt. (Ret.) Geno Piccoli at the 1989 AFSA International Convention for his uncommon valor and years of faithful service to mankind.

crewmen were damaged and burning from enemy attack. Their stories were remarkably similar.

It should be noted that the case of Staff Sergeant Smith illustrates that the awarding the Medal of Honor in the Air Corps in World War II was completely divorced from promotion policy. In fact, it seemed to have been part of a demotion policy as far as Smith was concerned. Staff Sergeant Smith flew his first mission on May 1, 1943, over Saint-Nazaire, France. With the plane afire he managed to render first aid to wounded crewmen, man machine guns, and throw exploding ammunition overboard. Escaping oxygen made the fire so hot that the radio, gun mount and camera melted and ammunition began to explode. Smith stayed at his post and put out the fire. For this he was awarded the nation's highest decoration, the Medal of Honor. After four more combat missions, he was ordered before a medical board and found to be suffering from "operational exhaustion." The rigors of the first mission apparently had been too much for him. He was reassigned to non-combat clerical duties and reduced to buck private. He was still a buck private when discharged May 26, 1945. This seemed a peculiar situation. It would have been unthinkable for an officer winner to be reduced in rank because he suddenly became afflicted with "operational exhaustion" after winning the Medal. Several such cases were on record and no reduction in rank took place.

The case of Staff Sergeant Henry "Red" Erwin was a typical enlisted Air Corps saga of World War II. Enlisting for flight training on July 27, 1942, at twenty-one, he sweated out the next six months at his home in Birmingham, Alabama, anxiously awaiting orders. Finally, in February 1943, he was called to active duty as an aviation cadet. Then, midway in cadet training, he was washed out. Erwin joined the vast throng of enlisted crewmen who had not quite made it in cadets.

By April of 1945 Henry Erwin was a staff sergeant radio operator on a B-29 of the Fifty-second Bomber Group flying strikes against the Japanese home islands. On April 12 his crew flew as lead aircraft in a major raid against the chemical factories at Koriyama. What happened to him that day was starkly described in the citation for his Medal of Honor:

> He was the radio operator of a B-29 airplane leading a group formation to attack Koriyama, Japan. He was charged with the additional duty of dropping phosphoresce [sic] smoke bombs to aid in assembling the group when the launching point was reached. Upon entering the assembled area, anti-aircraft fire and enemy fighter opposition was encountered. Among the phosphoresce bombs launched by Sergeant Erwin, one proved faulty, exploding in the launching chute, and shot back into the interior of the aircraft striking him in the face. The burning phosphoresce obliterated his nose and completely blinded him. Smoke filled the plane, obscuring the vision of the pilot. Sergeant Erwin realized that the aircraft and crew would be lost if the burning bomb remained in the plane. Without regard for his own safety, he picked it up and, feeling his way, instinctively crawled around the gun turret and headed for the co-pilot's window. He found the navigator's table obstructing his passage. Grasping the burning bomb between his forearm and body, he unleashed the spring lock and raised the table. Struggling through the narrow passage, he stumbled forward into the smoke-filled pilot's compartment. Groping with his burning hands, he located the window and threw the bomb out. Completely aflame, he fell back upon the floor. The smoke cleared and the pilot, at three hundred feet, pulled the airplane out of its dive. Sergeant Erwin's gallantry and heroism above and beyond the call of duty saved the lives of his comrades.

Sergeant Red Erwin somehow survived and was rushed to the States for medical care. In June 1945 he was awarded the Medal of Honor and in October a grateful Army Air Force promoted him to Master Sergeant. It was not until October 8, 1947, two and a half years after that flaming day over Koriyama, that he was discharged from Valley Forge General Hospital, Pennsylvania, and returned to his home at Birmingham, Alabama. He was the only enlisted airman to win the Medal in the Pacific Theater.

The ending of hostilities in 1945 witnessed an emotional wave on the part of the public to express gratitude to military leaders who had guided the armed forces successfully through the greatest struggle in history. In 1945 there was a strong movement in Congress to award a special Medal of Honor to General Dwight D. Eisenhower, commander of the victorious Allied forces in Europe. This Medal was disapproved by the War Department on the grounds that the award should be reserved for gallantry in action with an armed enemy. General Eisenhower expressed his agreement with the Department's opinion. The War Department recommended that special gold medals be

Valor

Red Erwin's Personal Purgatory

Without counting the cost to himself, SSgt. Henry Erwin did what had to be done to save the B-29 crew.

BY JOHN L. FRISBEE

We may marvel at the heroism and tenacity of the men whose stories have been told in this column, but few readers can truly comprehend the suffering of many Vietnam POWs, the epic struggle of Lance Sijan, or the gallantry of Jack Mathis. What they did lies beyond the realm of our experience. But most of us have borne in some small degree the kind of anguish SSgt. Henry E. Erwin endured to save the lives of his fellow crewmen. We can empathize with his suffering and perhaps more fully appreciate the depth of his heroism.

On April 12, 1945, the *City of Los Angeles*, a 29th Bombardment Group aircraft commanded by Capt. George Simeral, led a formation of Guam-based B-29s in a low-level attack on a chemical plant at Koriyama, some 120 miles north of Tokyo. It was the eleventh combat mission for Captain Simeral's lead crew. Alabama-born Henry Erwin, known to his family as "Gene" and to his squadron mates as "Red," was the B-29's radio operator. According to retired Colonel Simeral, a holder of the DSC, Erwin was "a country boy, quiet, unassuming, religiously devout," and the best radioman of the 52d Bomb Squadron.

One of Erwin's additional duties was to drop a phosphorus smoke bomb through a chute in the B-29's floor when the lead plane reached an assembly area over enemy territory. He was given the signal to drop the bomb when the *City of Los Angeles* was off the south coast of Japan and under attack by flak ships. Erwin, bare-headed and with shirtsleeves rolled up, pulled the pin and released his bomb into the chute. The fuse malfunctioned, igniting the phosphorus, which burned at a temperature of 1,300 degrees. (The heating element of an electric range glows red at 1,100 degrees.) The canister blew back up the chute into Red Erwin's face, blinding him, searing off one ear, and filling the B-29 with heavy smoke that obscured the pilots' instrument panel.

Erwin knew that the bomb would burn through the metal floor into the bomb bay. It had to be jettisoned or the aircraft and crew were lost. Totally blind, he located the burning bomb on the floor, picked it up in his bare hands, and stumbled forward toward the flight deck, aiming to throw it out the copilot's window. As he groped his way around the gun turret, his face and arms covered with ignited phosphorus, his path was blocked by the navigator's folding table, hinged to the wall but now down and locked. The navigator had left his table to make a sighting.

Erwin needed both hands to release the table's latches. While he felt for them, he held the white-hot bomb under his bare right arm. In those seconds, the phosphorus burned through his flesh to the bone. Now a walking torch, Red Erwin staggered on into the cockpit, threw the bomb out the window, and collapsed between the pilots' seats.

Sergeant Erwin bore unbelievable pain to save his crewmates.

Captain Simeral, no longer blinded by smoke, pulled the B-29 out of a dive at 300 feet above the water and turned toward Iwo Jima where Sergeant Erwin could be given emergency treatment. Horrified crew members extinguished the flames consuming Erwin's clothing and administered first aid. Whenever the sergeant's burns were uncovered, phosphorus embedded in his flesh began to smoulder. In terrible pain, Erwin remained conscious throughout the flight to Iwo. He spoke only to inquire about the safety of the crew.

The medics at Iwo did not believe Erwin could survive. Cutting through red tape, AAF officials, spurred by Maj. Gen. Curtis LeMay and Brig. Gen. Lauris Norstad, approved award of the Medal of Honor in a matter of hours, so a presentation could be made while Erwin lived. A Medal was flown to Guam and presented in the hospital there.

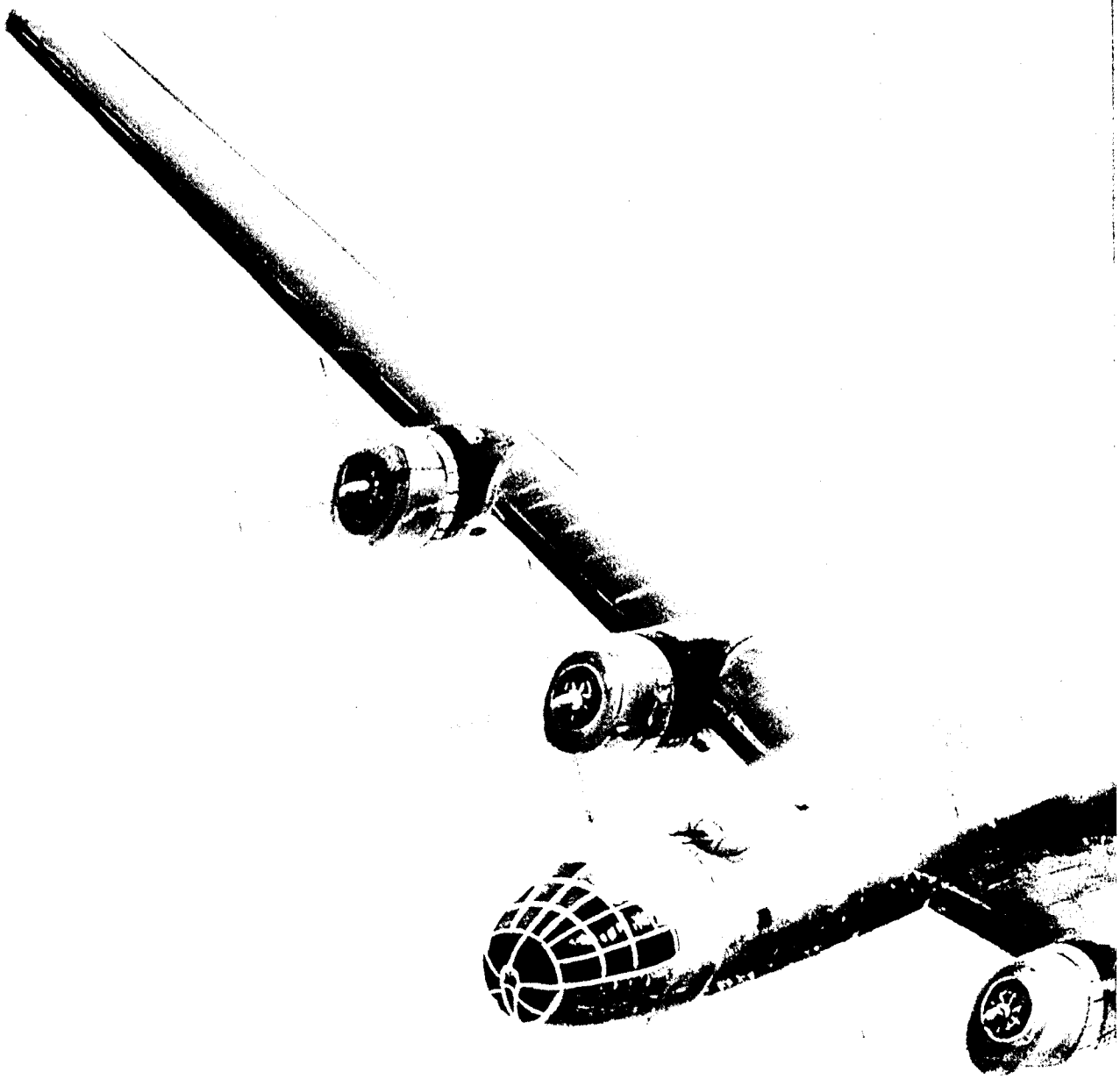
Contrary to the flight surgeons' opinion, Sergeant Erwin did survive. He was evacuated to the States, and after thirty months and reconstructive surgery that restored his eyesight and the use of one arm, Red Erwin was given a disability discharge from the AAF as a master sergeant in October 1947. For thirty-seven years he served as a Veterans' Benefit Counselor at the VA Hospital in Birmingham.

While Sergeant Erwin lay swathed in bandages in the hospital at Guam, Gen. Hap Arnold wrote: "I regard your act as one of the bravest in the records of this war." No one could argue with that judgment. Red Erwin was, and always will remain, a hero among heroes. ■

Alabama HERITAGE

PUBLISHED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA

Winter 1996 Number 39 $5.00



Just in Time, *a lithograph by Keith Hill of Erwin's B-29,* City of Los Angeles. *On April 12, 1945, smoke from a faulty phosphorus flare completely obscured the pilot's vision, sending the plane into a dive. (Courtesy Enlisted Heritage Hall, USAF)*

RED ERWIN *and the* MEDAL *of* HONOR

He was on fire. His hair and one ear had burned off, but Red Erwin took action that saved both aircraft and crew. No one thought he'd live long enough to receive the Medal of Honor.

By JUDD A. KATZ

"OF COURSE, *I had those Buck Rogers dreams that I was going to be a pilot. . . . I was going to win the Medal of Honor, believe it or not.*"

ON APRIL 12, 1945, STAFF Sergeant Henry "Red" Erwin of Docena, Alabama, was aboard a B-29 named *City of Los Angeles* flying toward the day's bombing target, Koriyama, Japan. It was his eighteenth air mission in the Pacific theater of war. Erwin, a radioman, was assigned to the Twentieth Air Force, Twenty-ninth Bombardment Group, Fifty-second Bomb Squadron of the U.S. Army Air Corps. As an ancillary duty, radiomen had the task of launching signal bombs and flares during missions, notifying other planes in the bomber squadron to assemble behind the lead aircraft in preparation for a bombing raid. Normally about two or three phosphorous bombs were necessary to signal the bombers to assume formation.

"On the night raids," Erwin later told an interviewer, "we were the pathfinder. We would go in and light it up and get out. On the daylight raids, we would form up about fifty miles off the coast and go into the formation with the lead crew. Of course, that's when the Japs would fight us all the way in and all the way out."

At the assigned moment, Erwin positioned himself on his knees and began throwing signal bombs down the chute. Following his normal procedure, he pulled the pin and then waited eight to ten seconds before releasing the bomb into the tube.

Then, on the last one—something, I had a premonition when I threw this one—we either hit an air pocket or there was a malfunction in the bomb. I knew it was coming back, and I tried to put my foot on it and kick it out, but it came on into the plane. . . . I knew that sucker was coming back.

It was just a matter of feet or inches. If it had just gone a little farther, the signal bomb would have cleared the body of the aircraft and fired outside. . . .

When it came back, it hit me in the face and . . . exploded. Instantly, it put my eyes out, burned my ear off, burned my hair off; my uniform was on fire. I thought to myself, "I can't see." The first thing I was always taught was "don't panic." If you panic, you are not going to be able to do anything. The first inclination, even after all this teaching, is self-preservation; how do you get out of here?

With the signal bomb now in the crew compartment and burning white hot at about fifteen hundred degrees, the cockpit began to fill with smoke, preventing the pilot, Capt. George A. Simaral, from seeing his instruments. "He couldn't understand what was happening," said Erwin. "[The pilots] were at sort of a loss there, it happened so quick. . . . I could tell we were going down, having been in the aircraft so many times." Complicating the already volatile situation, the main bomb-load was already fused and ready to be dropped. Any jarring motion of the plane would have caused the bombs to explode. Erwin continued:

Now here I am in the radio operator's shack back in the corner, obstructed behind the navigator. This thing is at my feet, and I'm on fire, and I'm burning. I said, "Lord, I need your help now." . . . I knew that I could not physically . . . move this thing without the help of the good Lord; and being a Christian, I asked God for help, and He gave me help. A lot of people will say, "That's a lot of fantasy." I say, "That's not fantasy. If He hadn't been there, I wouldn't be here today."

I reached down; I grabbed [the ignited bomb] with my right hand; I began to crawl. I remember opening the navigator's table, crawling by the engineer—the flight engineer was on the right; went up between the pilot and copilot. I told Captain Simaral, the flight commander; to open the window, and I flipped it out.

It didn't seem hard, but actually it seemed like miles when you are burning. When you are on fire, you cannot see, and you are crawling by instinct, you have been in the aircraft so many times. You are on adrenaline, and you feel there is no pain; in other words, you have one goal: Reach that window. You know if you can hit that window, you can get it out of there, and the whole crew can be saved, and you can be saved. That is the goal, and that is your aim—to get that bomb out of there.

It probably took me ten seconds to find that sucker with my feet, but it wasn't too long because we were falling. I could tell we were going down.

Erwin estimates that the plane was about three hundred feet above the water when he reached the cockpit.

Young Red Erwin from Docena, Alabama, could not wait to get into World War II. His eighteenth air mission, however, would be his last. (Courtesy Mr. and Mrs. Henry E. Erwin)

"THEY WERE *scraping phosphorous out of my eyes. I was still smoldering; in fact, I was still smoldering thirty days later when I got to Sacramento.*"

As soon as [the captain] opened the window, I pitched [the bomb] out, then the breeze sucked all the smoke out. They saw me, and Captain Simaral said, "My Lord, what's wrong?" They instantly began first aid.

In those frantic moments, it may have occurred to some of those on board that Red Erwin, whose calm response to impending disaster had just saved the crew, the aircraft, and himself, probably wouldn't live long enough to receive his due recognition.

SINCE THE INCEPTION of the Medal of Honor award during the Civil War, the decoration has been given 3,420 times for "courage above and beyond the call of duty." Instituted in 1861, the award was originally intended only for navy enlisted men, but in 1862 army personnel and officers became eligible as well. The medal was first issued in 1863 to six of the surviving members of the Andrews raid, an action in which twenty-two Union soldiers, under the command of Secret Service Agent James Andrews, commandeered a Confederate locomotive near Atlanta, Georgia, and raced to Chattanooga, destroying rail lines and bridges along the way.

The vast majority of the recipients to date have been members of the army, navy, or marine corps, and it is a rare event indeed when the award is presented to an enlisted airman. In fact, only five enlisted United States Army Air Corps or Air Force personnel have received the Medal of Honor (four during World War II and one during the Vietnam War). The reason so few airmen are represented among the honorees is twofold: First, air power is relatively new to combat operations; the U.S. Army Air Corps (initially called the Army Air Service) originated during World War I, and the U.S. Air Force was formed in 1947. Second, the air force differs from the other services in its approach to combat. The main fighting unit in the air force is a fighter or bomber aircraft piloted by a commissioned officer. Unlike the army or marines, where the majority of enlisted personnel are in direct combat specialties (infantry, artillery, or armor), most airmen work in support areas to maintain the primary weapon system—the aircraft.

Even on board the plane, enlisted personnel do not pilot the craft or determine its course. Nevertheless, on April 12, 1945, an enlisted airman took action that saved the aircraft and the crew. For his valor, he was awarded the Medal of Honor.

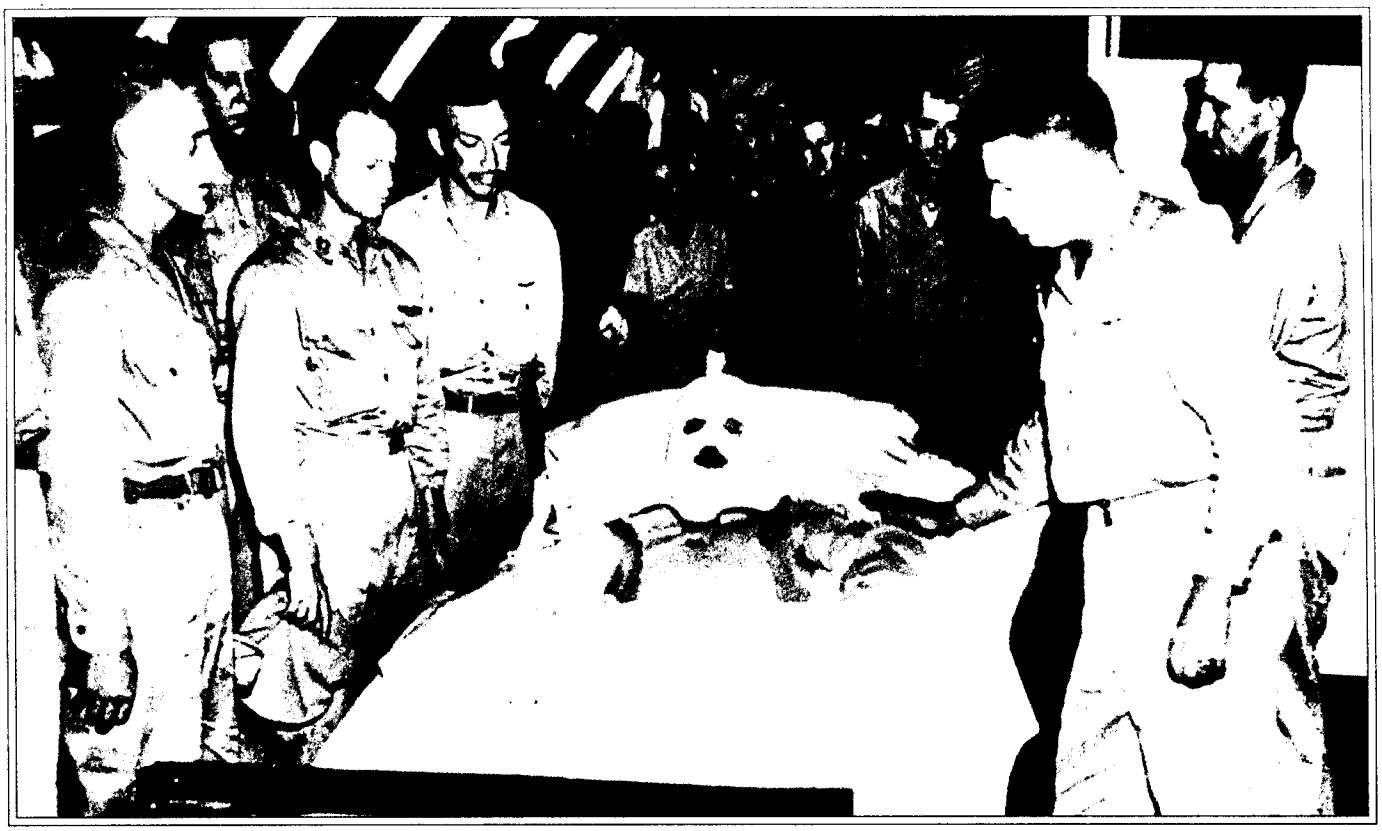
HENRY ERWIN WAS BORN in 1921 in Docena, a small Alabama town near Birmingham. Almost every child in Docena had a nickname, and Henry, with his flaming red hair, became "Red." The oldest of seven children, Red was ten years old when his father died. To help support the family, he began working in a coal company commissary after school, earning between fifty cents and one dollar a night.

After two years of secondary school at J. W. Minor High School, Erwin, age seventeen, joined the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) in July of 1938. He held the rank of leader (equivalent to a first sergeant), was placed in charge of 220 men, and earned forty-five dollars a month to work in soil conservation. "The idea was to stop the washing of the gullies," he said. "You've seen all the kudzu all over Alabama? My group helped plant all that stuff, and it has covered the whole state now."

Transferred to another CCC site in California, Camp Hackamore, Erwin worked in forestry, fighting fires and cutting down dead timbers. By July 1939, he was back in Alabama. This time he found a job with the Fairfield Steel Works, located just outside of Birmingham. He was still working for Fairfield when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

With the United States now at war, Erwin and his brothers felt an obligation to sign up. Carey joined the navy, Alvan and Alonzo went into the army, and Howard volunteered for the marines. Red joined the army air corps. It was a day he will not forget:

I took that four-hour test at the post office—I remember it very well—in July 1942. I felt like I had a responsibility to get into the military service, even though I probably could have stayed out with a deferment, being the breadwinner in my family. But like most kids back at that time—Japan had attacked us—I felt like I would be shirking my duty if I didn't enlist like many of my cohorts did.



On Iwo Jima, approximately forty-eight hours after his injury, Red Erwin was awarded the Medal of Honor. Maj. Gen. Willis Hale, commander of U.S. Army Air Forces in the Pacific, Maj. Gen. Curtis LeMay, and the officers and crew of the City of Los Angeles *gathered at Erwin's bedside for the award. (Courtesy Enlisted Heritage Hall, USAF)*

Erwin's acceptance into the army air corps brought him considerable satisfaction.

Back then you either had to be a college graduate or pass that test. I felt real proud of myself that I only had two years of high school, but I did pass this college examination to get into the air corps.

Erwin was not called to active duty until January 1943. By then, he had had time to think about military service and to envision his role in the war. "Of course, I had those Buck Rogers dreams that I was going to be a pilot," he said. "I was going to shoot down all these Japs or these Germans, and I was going to win the Medal of Honor, believe it or not."

He volunteered for combat, was sent to Army Technical School in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, and then to an advanced radio class at Truax Field, Wisconsin.

Then they approached me about going to Yale for an additional seventeen weeks to be a second lieutenant communications officer, but I just felt like, being a kid then and seeing the war winding down, I wasn't going to get into combat with the Japanese or the Germans, so I turned it down.

"Red, are you all right?" said Captain Simaral, who finally got a glimpse of the airman beside him, the man who had just thrown a lighted phosphorous bomb out the window of their smoke-filled B-29.

"I'm fine," said Erwin, but he was not all right. His hair was gone; his ear was burned off; he appeared to be blind, and his clothes were on fire. Erwin remembers the moment vividly:

I was completely aflame. The first thing they had to do was take the fire extinguisher and put out the fire. Then they began giving me morphine. . . . They gave me one Syrette. I was never unconscious. I was still alert; I couldn't see them. I could respond to their talking.

Colonel Strouse [Lt. Col. Eugene O.], who was our squadron commander, did something that normally no commander would ever do. He told the bombardier, "Open those bomb-bay doors and drop those bombs right now. We are going to head for Iwo Jima." He asked the flight engineer, "How much fuel do we have, and how fast can we get back to Iwo Jima?"

We turned and headed for Iwo Jima. They wanted to give me some more morphine.

helped create new procedures for reconstructing eyelids and sockets. If a soldier's upper lid had been shot off, for instance, the doctor might transfer the skin from the lower lid to the upper one and replace the lower lid with skin from the cheek.

The army's first cautious experiments with the newly invented "wonder drug," penicillin, began in 1943, not long before Northington admitted its first patients. Before World War II, and indeed, until the war was more than half over, sulfa was the drug of choice for treating and preventing infections. But penicillin was faster and more effective, and so Northington, along with other military medical units, became one of the first hospitals in the country to use it.

If these medical breakthroughs were not invented at Northington, its doctors and nurses were among their first practitioners, for improved communications during the war years enhanced collaboration among medical personnel.

When the war ended, the army sold the Northington property to the University of Alabama for one dollar. Some of the former hospital buildings temporarily housed Tuscaloosa's Druid City Hospital until that facility moved to its current location on University Boulevard. The rest of the property became a much-needed addition to the university, then struggling to find housing for the large numbers of veterans who were entering college on the GI Bill.

Once enrollments settled down to more normal numbers, Northington's buildings fell empty again, and in the 1970s the university traded the property to the Alabama Mental Health Board for two hundred acres adjoining the campus. (Included in the newly acquired property was the mid-nineteenth-century building that now houses *Alabama Heritage*.)

Eventually the Mental Health Board leased the Northington property to Aronov Realty of Montgomery, who constructed University Mall on the site. Instead of bulldozing the old hospital complex, Aronov Realty allowed Warner Brothers to clear the lot for them. Many of Northington's largest buildings, as well as a tall smokestack, were blown up on screen for a 1978 Burt Reynolds action film called *Hooper*.

Only a few of Northington Hospital's original buildings stand today—one houses the Tuscaloosa City Board of Education; another is a practice building for the fire-fighting school of Shelton State Community College.

Joanna Jacobs served as an intern at Alabama Heritage *during the summer of 1995.*

I said, "Don't give me anymore of that stuff. You are going to kill me with that morphine."

A lot of people say, "How do you recall these things?"

There are things that happened last week that I can't remember; but I can remember these things as though it happened yesterday. Things that happen in combat you never forget. It is ingrained. It's like a TV prompter. You never forget. Even after the Lord let me get that thing out of there, I was in pain; I won't tell you a lie about it. I was in terrible pain. I thought, "Why did He save me?" I was in pain and agony, and I was actually wishing to die I was so badly burned. . . . It would have been a blessing if I had been unconscious.

When the B-29 landed at the Iwo Jima airfield, Erwin's body was so rigid that the crew had trouble removing him from the aircraft. Finally, they took one of the windows off the plane and lowered him through it.

Two days later, on April 14, 1945, Maj. Gen. Willis Hale and Maj. Gen. Curtis LeMay awarded Red Erwin the Medal of Honor. Permission to bestow the medal had been secured in record time because Erwin was not expected to survive. In attendance at the ceremony were the officers and crew of the *City of Los Angeles*.

ERWIN SPENT the next two years and seven months convalescing and undergoing extensive reconstructive and plastic surgery. Initially, he spent three days on Iwo Jima before he was flown to a hospital in Guam, where he stayed for several weeks.

Shortly before Erwin's departure to the United States, he was visited by General LeMay, who asked if there was anything he could do for the airman.

"Yes," said Erwin, "would you see if you can get my brother? He's up at Saipan."

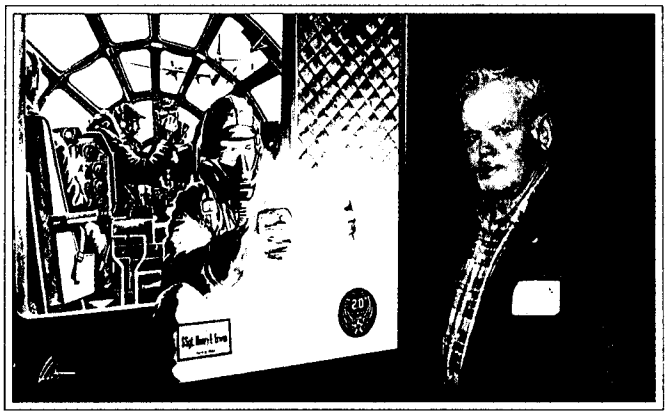
The next morning Howard Erwin was at Red's bedside. Red couldn't see him, but he remembers Howard touching him.

I hadn't seen him in four years. That was a very proud moment. It just makes tears come in my eyes because I was in a sad shape, to be very frank with you, but I enjoyed just being there with him.

Undoubtedly, Red Erwin was in pain. The phosphorous had imbedded itself into his body and was protected by his skin. Once exposed to the atmosphere, it reignited.

They were scraping phosphorous out of my eyes. I was still smoldering; in fact, I was still smoldering thirty days later when I got to Sacramento. . . . They would scrape and scrape.

"A LOT OF PEOPLE *say, 'How do you recall these things?' There are things that happened last week that I can't remember, but I can remember these things as though [they] happened yesterday.*"



Red Erwin stands by an artist's re-creation of the event that earned him one of our nation's highest awards. (Courtesy Enlisted Heritage Hall, USAF)

When he reached Sacramento, he was immediately put on a C-47 transport and flown directly to Northington General Hospital in Tuscaloosa, Alabama (see sidebar, pages 36-37). After spending a year at Northington, he was transferred to a hospital in Framingham, Massachusetts, where he spent seven months. The last thirteen months of his recovery, he convalesced at yet another hospital in Valley Forge. By the time he was released in October 1947, Erwin had undergone more than forty operations.

Both eyes were sewn up for over a year. . . . I've got about 20/40 vision in my right eye. . . . When I got out, they still wanted to do more surgery, but at that time I had had it! I was married; I wanted to go home and go to work. The right hand is reconstructed, but it is useless. I haven't been able to touch my head since April 12, 1945, because [my arm] is fused ninety degrees up at my elbow.

When Erwin was finally discharged from the hospital, he found that his government had not forgotten him. President Harry Truman had issued an executive order stating that any Medal of Honor recipient, otherwise qualified, was eligible for a veterans' benefits job. Erwin went to work for the Veterans Administration as a veterans' benefits counselor, a position he held for thirty-seven years. He handled veterans' claims and informed them of their benefits and privileges. Erwin thoroughly enjoyed his work and pursued it with a passion.

I would leave my house at 4:30 in the morning. I would be in the office working at 5:00, even though I was my own boss for the last twenty-five years. I didn't have to actually get there, but having the Medal of Honor, which says "above and beyond," I always felt that since I was given the job by the federal government, I wanted to excel in it.

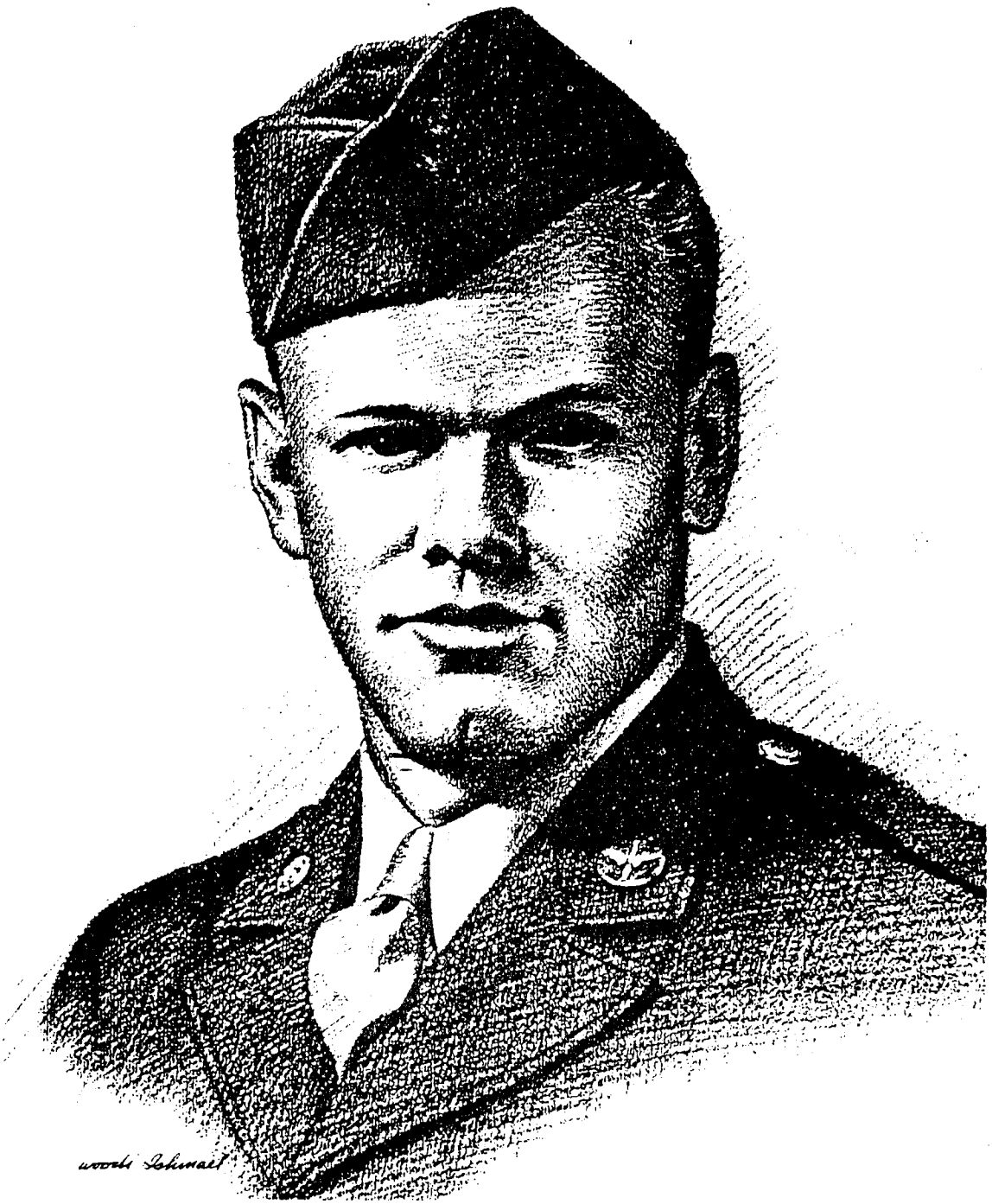
I will be very frank, I'm not bragging, I did excel in it. I got "outstanding" every year for the last twenty-five years . . . . When you can help someone, especially a fellow veteran or help a widow get the benefits that they are entitled to by law, that's your job—to go around the shortfalls, to go out there and get it.

Dedication of this type, Erwin believes, was central to United States' victory in World War II.

Leadership is one of those things that is set by example. In other words, it's like a father/son relationship. . . . you've got to live that life before them that will convince them you are valid and not a hypocrite. . . . We had the leaders, we had the logistics, and we had brave men in the right place at the right time . . . the kind of men that won the war for us in World War II.

Red Erwin retired from the Veterans Administration in 1984 with forty-three-and-one-half years of combined federal service. Today, he lives in Leeds, Alabama, and spends his time traveling, working on his small farm, and supporting air force and military organizations with lectures and appearances. At the biennial meeting of the Twenty-ninth Bombardment Group, which met last year in Kansas City, Missouri, Erwin and his fellow veterans placed a rose on the grave of President Harry Truman. He remains in close touch with the United States Air Force Senior Noncommissioned Officer Academy at the Gunter Annex of Maxwell Air Force Base in Montgomery, where he often speaks at dedication ceremonies or addresses a graduating class.

Last November, the National Veterans' Day Program, held in Birmingham, named Erwin one of the National Veterans of the Year. He was among the few enlisted men to be so honored. Plans are now underway to institute a regional award for outstanding air force enlisted personnel. The award for the Southern region will bear the name Henry "Red" Erwin.



STAFF SERGEANT HENRY EUGENE ERWIN

was radio operator of a B–29 leading a group to attack Koriyama, Japan, 12 April 1945. He was also charged with dropping phosphorescent smoke bombs to aid in assembling the group on the bomb run. A faulty bomb exploded, striking him in the face, obliterating his nose and completely blinding him. Smoke filled the plane, totally obscuring the pilot's vision. Ignoring personal safety and indescribable pain, Sergeant Erwin picked up the white-hot bomb, crawled to a window, threw the bomb out and then collapsed, completely aflame. The smoke cleared and the pilot pulled the plane out of its dive, only 300 feet from the ground. Sergeant Erwin had saved the lives of all of his comrades.

Born Adamsville, Alabama, 8 May 1921.

Henry E Erwin, Cpl AUS

April 19, 1945

Script of Decoration Ceremony
Medal of Honor for S/Sgt Henry Erwin
For shortwave to Blue, San Francisco
For "The Fighting AAF"

This is your Fighting AAF in the Marianas. We have brought our microphone into a hospital room on this remote Pacific Island to bring you first hand the award of the Congressional Medal of Honor to Staff Sergeant Henry Eugene Erwin of the Army Air Forces. At Sergeant Erwin's bedside here are Major General Willis H. Hale, Commanding General, Army Air Forces, Pacific Ocean Area, who will make the award. Major General Curtis E. LeMay, Commanding General, Twenty-First Bomber Command, in one of whose B-29s Sergeant Erwin is a radioman, and Brigadier General Thomas Power, Sergeant Erwin's Wing Commander. Also present at this ceremony are his Group and Squadron Commanders and the crew of his plane. Sergeant Erwin, whose home address is Box 624, Route 4, Bessemer, Alabama, is twenty-four years old. The wounds which have hospitalized him were incurred when he deliberately offered his life to save his crewmates and his plane while flying on a mission over Japan. He was successful. Now, only seven days after that action, he is to recieve the Nation's highest award. The citation, which will be read by General Hale, tells his story... General Hale: Today is the first time I have ever had the honor of presenting the Congressional Medal of Honor. I've never know of one being more deserved. It is an example of sheer guts and will power in overcoming physical agony. I think this event as expressed in the citation is outstanding in military history.

By direction of the President, under provisions of the act of Congress approved the 9th of July, 1918, a Medal of Honor is awarded by the War Department in the name of Congress to Staff Sergeant Henry Eugene Erwin with the following citation:

"Staff Sergeant Henry Eugene Erwin, was the radio operator of a B-29 airplane leading a group formation to attack Koriyama, Japan, on 12 April 1945. He was charged with the additional duty of dropping phosphorus bombs to aid in assembling the group when the rendezvous point was reached. Upon entering the assembly area, anti-aircraft fire and enemy fighter opposition was encountered. Among the phosphorus bombs launched by Sergeant Erwin, one proved faulty, exploding in the launching chute and shot back into the interior of the aircraft striking him in the face. Smoke filled the plane, obscuring the vision of the pilot. Sergeant Erwin realized that the aircraft and crew would be lost if the buring bomb remained in the plane. Without regard for his own safety, he picked it up and, feeling his way instinctively, crawled around the gun turret and headed for the co-pilot's window. Having cleared the turret, he found the navigator's table obstructing his passage. Clasping the burning bomb between his forearm and body, he unlatched the spring lock and raised the table. Struggling through the narrow passage, he stumbled forward into the smoke filled pilot's compartment. Groping with his burning hands, he located the window, threw out the bomb and, completely aflame, fell back upon the floor. The smoke cleared and the pilot, at three hundred feet, pulled the plane out of its dive. Sergeant Erwin's gallantry and heroism above and beyond the call of duty saved the lives of his comrades. By order of the Secretary of War. George C. Marshall, Chief of Staff."

"We are greatly honored, Sergeant Erwin, in being able to present in the name of the President, the Congressional Medal of Honor."
ANNCR: General Hale has just placed the Medal of Honor on Sergeant Erwin. You have heard, in an on-the-spot recording, the award of the Congressional Medal of Honor to Staff Sergeant Henry Eugene Erwin of Bessemer, Alabama. This is your AAF Combat Reporter, Staff Sergeant Hal Brown, speaking from the Marianas, and returning you to the United States.

Henry E Erwin, Cpl

valor and intrepidity at an extreme hazard to life. With the apparent certainty of being forced to land in enemy territory or to perish at sea, General Doolittle personally led a squadron of Army bombers, manned by volunteer crews, in a highly destructive raid on the Japanese mainland.

Distinguished Service Medal with one Oak Leaf Cluster
DSM - GO 49, WD, 26 Aug 43
1st OLC - GO 89, WD, 28 Nov 44
Silver Star - GO 87, NW African Air Force, 6 Apr 43
Distinguished Flying Cross with two Oak Leaf Clusters
Bronze Star Medal - GO 47, U. S. Strategic Air Forces in Europe, 8 May 45
Air Medal with three Oak Leaf Clusters
AM - GO 8, NW African Air Force, 21 Feb 43
1st OLC - GO 40, NW African Air Force, 9 Apr 43
2d OLC - GO 88, NW African Air Force, 28 May 43
3d OLC - GO 7, XII Bomb Comd, 14 Sep 43
American Defense Service Medal with one Bronze Service Star
Asiatic-Pacific Campaign Medal with one Bronze Service Star
European-African-Middle Eastern Campaign Medal with nine Bronze Service Stars
American Campaign Medal
World War II Victory Medal

FOREIGN DECORATIONS

British Order of the Bath (Knight Commander)
French Legion of Honor (Grand Officer) with Croix de Guerre with Palm
Belgian Order of the Crown (Grand Officer) with Croix de Guerre with Palm
Polish Order of Restoration of Poland
Chinese Yun-Hwei (Class III)
Bolivian Order of the Condor Medal
Ecuadorean Abdon Calderon (First Class)

TROPHIES

Schneider and Mackay Trophies, 1925
Harmon Trophy, 1930
Bendix Trophy, 1931
~~Thompson Trophy, 1932~~

ERWIN, HENRY EUGENE (14 135 542)

Henry Eugene Erwin was born 8 May 1921 at Adamsville, Alabama

PROMOTIONS

Private, Enlisted Reserve Corps	27 Jul 42
Aviation Cadet	8 Feb 43
Private, Army of the United States, Air Corps	2 Jun 43
Private First Class, Army of the United States, Air Corps	9 Jul 43
Corporal (temporary), Army of the United States, Air Corps	8 Aug 44
Sergeant (temporary), Army of the United States, Air Corps	15 Oct 44
Staff Sergeant, Army of the United States, Air Corps	16 Mar 45
Master Sergeant, Army of the United States, Air Corps	19 Oct 45

SERVICE SCHOOLS ATTENDED

Army Air Forces Radio Operator and Mechanic School, Sioux Falls, South Dakota	1944
Army Air Forces Technical School, Truax Field, Madison, Wisconsin	1944

RATED Aircrew Member

MEDAL OF HONOR

DETAILS OF SERVICE

Sergeant Erwin enlisted in the Enlisted Reserve Corps as a Private on 27 July 1942 at Birmingham, Alabama, and was called to active duty as an Aviation Cadet on 3 February 1943. He began his training at the Army Air Forces Classification Center, Nashville, Tennessee. He was transferred to the Army Air Forces Preflight Training School at Maxwell Field, Alabama, on 1 March 1943, where he received his preflight training. On 4 May 1943, he was attached to the 57th Army Air Forces Training Detachment at Ocala, Florida, where he was eliminated from further pilot training due to flying deficiency.

On 2 June 1943, he was transferred to the 603d Training Group, St. Petersburg, Florida, in the grade of Private. He was promoted to Private First Class on 9 July 1943 and transferred to the 305th Technical School Squadron at Keesler Field, Mississippi. Then he attended the Radio Operator and Mechanic School at Sioux Falls, South Dakota, and graduated from this course on 21 February 1944. He received further technical training at the Army Air Forces Technical School at Truax Field, Madison, Wisconsin, and successfully completed the Radio Mechanic and Operator course on 1 April 1944.

Upon completion of his training, he was assigned to the 52nd Bombardment Group, at Dalhart, Texas. He departed the United States with this organization on 7 February 1945, from Mather Field, California, for service in the Asiatic-Pacific Theater of Operations. From 25 February to 1 April 1945, he participated in historical combat missions striking at the key cities in the heart of the Japanese Empire. For these missions, which were performed without fighter escort, Sergeant Erwin was awarded the Air Medal with one Oak Leaf Cluster.

52 Bomb Sq, 29 Bomb Gp B-29's

He was seriously wounded in action on 12 April 1945, while on a combat mission to Koriyama, Japan. One of the phosphorous smoke bombs which he launched was faulty, exploded in the launching chute, shot back into the aircraft, and seriously wounded and blinded him. The smoke filled the plane, obscuring the vision of the pilot. Sergeant Erwin managed to throw the bomb from the plane, and for this gallant and heroic act, he was awarded the nation's highest decoration, the Medal of Honor.

Sergeant Erwin was honorably discharged at Valley Forge General Hospital, Phoenixville, Pennsylvania, on 8 October 1947. His latest address of record is shown as 1212 82nd Street, Ensley, Birmingham, Alabama. 35218 (as of Sep 82)

DECORATIONS AND AWARDS Presented MH by Maj Gen Willie H. Hale at Guam hospital, ca. 18 Apr 1945.

Medal of Honor, WD GO 44, 6 Jun 45 *Citation* - Staff Sergeant Henry E. Erwin was the radio operator of a B-29 airplane leading a group formation to attack Koriyama, Japan, on 12 April 1945. He was charged with the additional duty of dropping phosphorous smoke bombs to aid in assembling the group when the rendezvous point was reached. Upon entering the assembly area, antiaircraft fire and enemy fighter opposition was encountered. Among the phosphorous bombs launched by Sergeant Erwin, one proved faulty, exploded in the launching chute, and shot back into the interior of the aircraft striking him in the face. The burning phosphorous obliterated his nose and completely blinded him. Smoke filled the plane, obscuring the vision of the pilot. Sergeant Erwin realized that the aircraft and crew would be lost if the burning bomb remained in the plane. Without regard for his own safety, he picked it up and, feeling his way, instinctively crawled around the gun turret and headed for the copilot's window. He found the navigator's table obstructing his passage. Clasping the burning bomb between his forearm and body, he unlatched the spring lock and raised the table. Struggling through the narrow passage he stumbled forward into the smoke-filled pilot's compartment. Groping with burning hands, he located the window and threw the bomb out. Completely aflame, he fell back upon the floor. The smoke cleared and the pilot at 800 feet pulled the airplane out of its dive. Sergeant Erwin's gallantry and heroism above and beyond the call of duty, saved the lives of his comrades.

Air Medal with one Oak Leaf Cluster
AM - GO 50, Hq XXI Bomber Comd, 29 Mar 45
OLC - GO 67, Hq XII Bomber Comd, 19 Apr 45

Purple Heart - GO 52, Hq Army Garrison Force, 11 Jun 45
World War II Victory Medal
American Campaign Medal
Good Conduct Medal and Clasp with two Loops
Asiatic-Pacific Campaign Medal with two Bronze Service Stars for participation in the Air Offensive Japan and Western Pacific Campaigns
Distinguished Unit Citation Emblem
Aviation Badge "Aircrew Member"

FEMOYER, ROBERT EDWARD (02 060 262)

Robert Edward Femoyer was born 30 October 1921 at Huntington, West Virginia

APPOINTMENTS AND PROMOTIONS

Private, Enlisted Reserve Corps	11 Nov 42
Aviation Cadet	28 Jul 43
Second Lieutenant (temporary), Army of the United States, Air Corps	10 Jun 44

SERVICE SCHOOLS ATTENDED

University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania	1943
Army Air Forces Preflight School, Maxwell Field, Alabama	1943
Army Air Forces Flexible Gunnery School, Fort Myers, Florida	1944
Army Air Forces Navigation School, Selman Field, Louisiana	1944

RATED Navigator

DETAILS OF SERVICE

Lieutenant Femoyer enlisted in the Enlisted Reserve Corps on 11 November 1942, in the grade of Private, at Roanoke, Virginia, and was called to active duty on 2 February 1943 at Richmond, Virginia. He was transferred to the Basic Training Center Number 4 at Miami Beach, Florida, and remained at this center until 24 March 1943.

He received his aircrew training at the University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, from 26 March to 5 June 1943, when he was transferred to the Nashville Army Air Center, Nashville, Tennessee. He then received his preflight training from 28 July to 1 October 1943 at the Army Air Forces Preflight School at Maxwell Field, Alabama, and began his primary flying training at the Mississippi Institute of Aeronautics, Jackson, Mississippi. On 6 November 1943, he was relieved from further pilot training because of flying deficiency and recommended for reclassification.

He was stationed at Selman Field, Louisiana, from 19 November to 11 December 1943 and then attended the Army Air Forces Flexible Gunnery School at Fort Myers, Florida, from 12 December 1943 to 5 February 1944. He received his advanced navigation training at the Army Air Forces Navigation School, Selman Field, Louisiana graduated on 10 June 1944, and was commissioned a Second Lieutenant, Army of the United States, with a rating of Navigator.

After receiving his commission, he was assigned to the Second Air Force, Army Air Field, Lincoln, Nebraska. He was attached to the 224th Army Air Forces Base Unit, Army Air Base, Sioux City, Iowa, from 9 July to 25 August 1944, when he was transferred to the 273d Army Air Forces Base Unit, Lincoln, Nebraska, where he remained until his departure on 2 September 1944 for duty in the European Theater of Operations.

He was assigned to the 711th Bombardment Squadron, 447th Bombardment Group, on 20 September 1944 and was serving with this organization on 2 November 1944, when he was killed in action while on a mission near Merseburg, Germany. He was awarded the nation's highest decoration, the Medal of Honor, for his extreme gallantry on this mission.

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BC

"Is Everybody Else All Right, Sir?"

These were the only words uttered by SSgt Henry E. "Red" Erwin as he lay smoldering on the floor of a B-29 desperately trying to return to an emergency landing at Iwo Jima. Sergeant Erwin's words fit the actions of a man who had shortly before risked his own life to save the other eleven members of his crew. His selfless sacrifice, according to Air Force Colonel Corey Ford, was "a story of a night when the Congressional Medal of Honor seemed to be a modest award."

On 12 April 1945, SSgt Erwin was a radio operator/gunner aboard a B-29 leading a large formation of B-29s on a raid on a gasoline production plant in Koriyama, Japan. While dropping phosphorous marker bombs, a defective bomb exploded and came back into the aircraft. Although he was badly burned and blinded by the explosion, SSgt Erwin managed to pick up the white-hot bomb in his hands and crawl to a window of the cockpit where he threw it from the window. The plane was saved and Mr Erwin received the Medal of Honor in record time because doctors did not expect him to live.

Mr Henry E. (Red) Erwin is alive and well and will tell his remarkable story at the Maxwell-Gunter Annual Enlisted Dining-In on 21 April at the Gunter NCO Club. All enlisted personnel are invited to share this evening with Mr Erwin, a man who truly gave "above and beyond" to answer the call of service to his country. See your first sergeant for tickets. You'll be glad you did.

The Advertiser

METROPOLITAN C

MONTGOMERY, ALABAMA • THURSDAY, MARCH 6, 1986

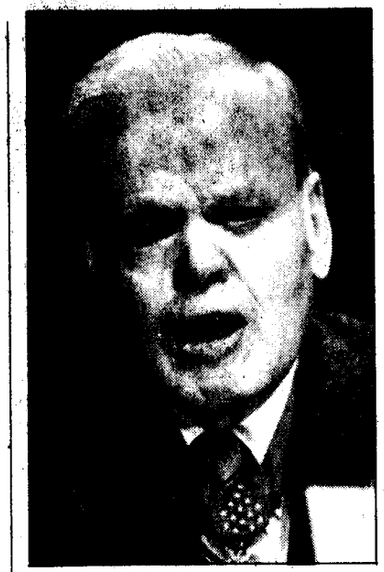
ALABAMA DIGEST

Practice Tornado Drill Scheduled For Alabama

A practice tornado watch and warning will be issued around Alabama sometime Thursday as part of Severe Weather Preparedness Week.

The National Weather Service in Birmingham will issue a tornado watch first and then a warning will be carried over all normal communications channels, including the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration weather radio.

The drill will be conducted in cooperation with the Alabama Emergency Management Agency, local



Former Staff Sgt. Henry E. Erwin
... honored at re-dedication

Three Medal of Honor Winners Praised

By MARK ALPERT
Advertiser Staff Writer

A badly scarred veteran from Leeds who won the Congressional Medal of Honor during World War II said God guided him when he saved a 12-man bomber crew by throwing a burning phosphorus bomb out of the plane.

Former Staff Sgt. Henry E. Erwin, who attended the re-dedication Wednesday of the U.S. Air Force Senior Non-commissioned Academy at Gunter Air Force Station, said he couldn't have performed his act of valor without the intervention of a 13th crew member — God.

Erwin was launching phosphorus bombs over Koriyama, Japan, on April 12, 1945, when a faulty charge exploded inside the B-29 aircraft.

Realizing that the aircraft and crew would be lost if the burning bomb remained in the plane, Erwin carried it to the co-pilot's window, disregarding severe burns on his hands and face.

"I was burning alive," Erwin said. "I couldn't see. I asked God to guide me. I had no pain after I asked God for guidance."

Erwin said his six years of military training also helped prevent him from panicking during the emergency.

Erwin was still close to death a week later when he received the Congressional Medal of Honor, the highest U.S. military decoration.

"They put the medal on my deathbed," Erwin said. "They told me later that I was coming and going. But I knew the good Lord wouldn't let me die."

Erwin returned to Alabama after 31 months in the hospital and 40 operations. He is one of only three living enlisted Air Force personnel to receive the Medal of Honor.

The other two recipients, former Tech. Sgt. Forrest L. Vosler of Syracuse, N.Y., and former Sgt. John L. Levitow of South Windsor, Conn., also attended the re-dedication ceremony.

Vosler, who was badly wounded in a bombing run over Bremen, Germany, in 1943, asked to be thrown out of his aircraft in order to lighten the plane. He was not thrown out.

Vosler said a religious experience also helped him overcome his injuries so he could continue sending radio distress signals.

"I saw for the first time how beautiful life had been," Vosler said.

Levitow, who served as loadmaster during a flight over Long Binh, South Vietnam, threw an unexploded flare out of his plane despite 40 shrapnel wounds in his back and legs.

The flare ignited immediately after Levitow hurled it out the cargo door.

"It was either temporary insanity or one hell of a good training and probably a little of both," Levitow said.

Chief Master Sgt. of the Air Force Sam E. Parish, the highest-ranking non-commissioned officer in the service, praised the three Medal of Honor recipients.

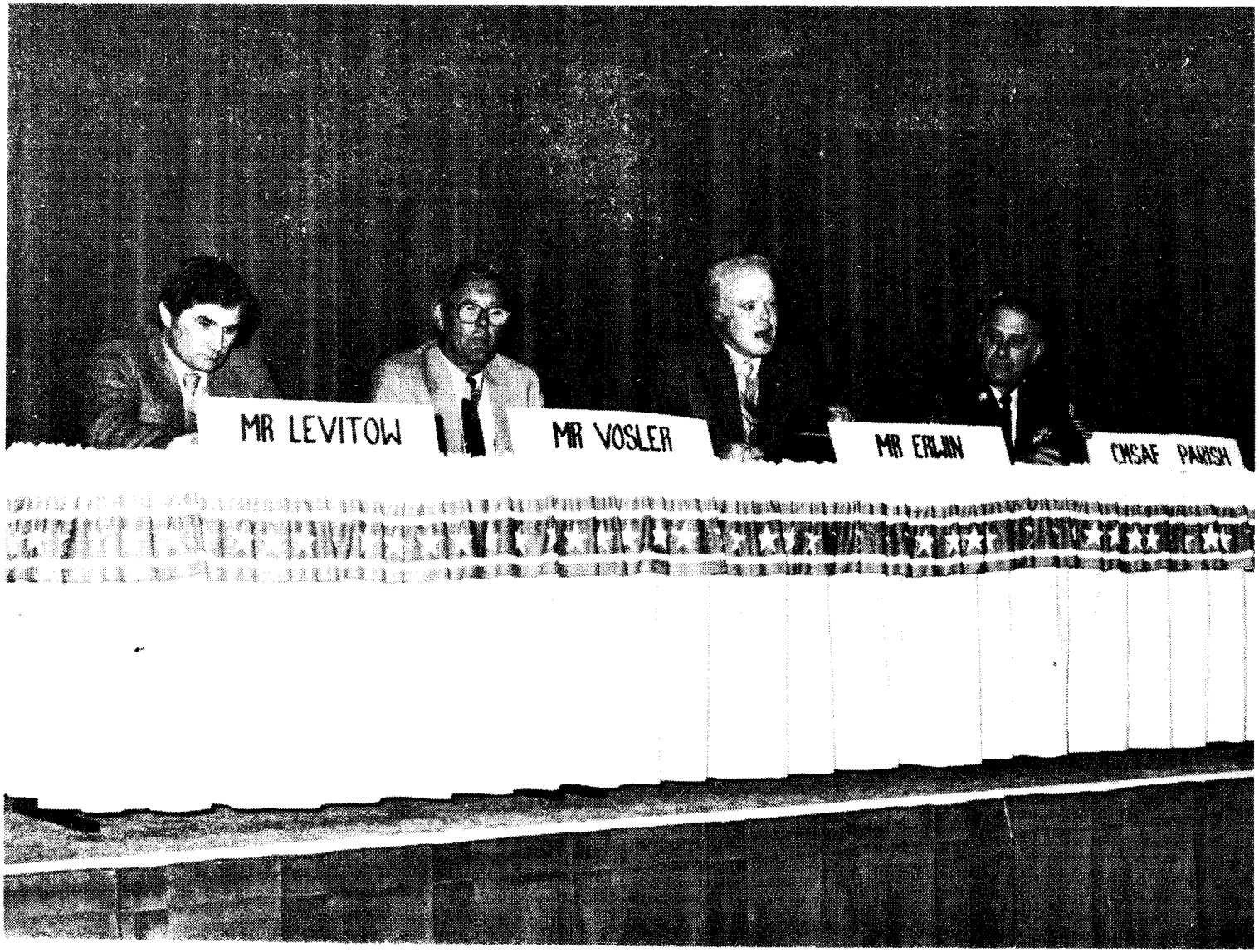
The Senior NCO Academy was renamed Kisling Hall at the ceremony to honor Richard Kisling, a former chief master sergeant of the Air Force who died last year.

A new wing was recently added to the academy as part of a $1.6 million construction project that began in May 1984, Air Force officials said.

The academy offers professional military education to senior non-commissioned officers who wish to advance their careers.

Each class of 250 officers undergoes a nine-week term of instruction, officials said. Parish was a member of the academy's Class of 1973.

Our town



Only living medal of honor recipients

The Congressional Medal of Honor recipients field questions from the media following the dedication of Kisling Hall at the Senior NCO Academy March 5 at Gunter. (L-R) John L. Levitow, Forrest L. Vosler, Henry E. Erwin and CMSAF Sam E. Parish.

(U.S. Air Force photos by Donna Noble)

Medal of Honor recipients discuss experiences

All agree training is necessary

by A1C Randy Roughton,
3800th ABW Public Affairs

What can make men cast aside personal fears and focus instead on the importance of duty and their responsibility to freedom and their nation? In a press conference following the Wednesday dedication of Kisling Hall at Gunter, the three living Air Force enlisted Congressional Medal of Honor recipients, John L. Levitow, Henry E. Erwin and Forrest L. Vosler, were asked this and each resounded the same heart-felt answer.

John L. Levitow, who had only been in the Air Force nearly fours years and is the only A1C to have ever received this once in a lifetime honor, said that there was no time to think. "I just did it. I don't know what caused me to react unless it was a temporary case of insanity or very good training. Maybe it was a little of both."

The other two recipients agreed with Levitow's explanation. Good training kept them calm in the most harrowing of experiences and in essence, kept them alive.

The experiences these men faced were in fact so harrowing that they "could see death's hand waiting to take them to another land," according to Erwin. Vosler said that "My life actually passed before my eyes, actually showing me all the scenes of my life in a matter of seconds. I could see how beautiful my life had been and I suddenly knew that I was going to die. Then it was a relief and I was actually disappointed when I didn't feel a hand guiding me to my death."

Both Vosler and Erwin are in harmony on the importance of training in their survival. Both were blind during what was probably the most dramatic experience in their lives and both say that they can now understand that they didn't go through it alone.

"I wouldn't have survived if there wasn't a 13th person on that plane with me. I know that God does answer prayer especially when I was burning alive on a plane and couldn't see. All I could do was ask God to guide me and not panic. I felt no pain after asking God for that guidance," said Erwin.

Not only did their training help these medal of honor recipients remain calm but it was vital to keep the other crew members calm.

After a decade of relative peace for the United States one question may arise. Where will our future Congressional Medal of Honor people come from? Where can America find another John Levitow, Henry Erwin and Forrest Vosler?

Despite public opinion about military recruiting, CMSAF Sam Parish remains confident. "The Air Force is recruiting the best caliber of young airmen and we now have the most dedicated enlisted force in history. It is a privilege to serve today and I'm not denying that the Air Force had it's enlisted history problems. However, we are trying to correct them and today is history. These three men are history for our Air Force, just sitting with them is a tremendous honor."

Sergeant Erwin and the Blazing Bomb

By Corey Ford

A story of a night when the Congressional Medal of Honor seemed to be a modest award

SOMETIMES I'm asked which I like best of all the pieces I've written. I guess the answer is something I wrote one night back in 1945, on the island of Guam. It was never published; I didn't even sign it; but it was more rewarding than anything else I've ever done.

Guam was our base in the Marianas from which the B-29's took off for their nightly incendiary raids on Japan. As an Air Force colonel, I had flown with them, and I knew what those missions were like. The seven endless hours over the Pacific to the hostile coastline. The wink of ack-ack guns and the flak bursts all around us, the ground searchlights that lighted up our cabin as though an auto had parked beside us in the sky, and, after our bomb run, the red ruin of an enemy city burning. We would throttle down to cruising speed; there were 1500 miles of empty ocean between us and home.

This particular night I was not flying. I sat in the Group headquarters tent with Col. Carl Storrie, waiting for the mission's strike report. Storrie, a lean tough Texan, was the Group Commander, and he paced up and down the tent, restless as a caged animal, as the first news filtered in. The lead plane, commanded by Capt. Tony Simeral, had been forced to turn away from the target, and had made an emergency landing at Iwo Jima. It was on its way back to Guam now.

We could make out the drone of its engines, see the red flares that

Readers Digest—July, 1965

signaled distress, and hear the fire trucks rumbling out to meet it as it touched down. A few moments later Captain Simeral entered the tent. His face was white; he seemed to be in a state of shock. He fumbled for a cigarette with his left hand, and I saw that the back of his right hand was pockmarked with deep ugly holes that had burned clear to the bone. He took several drags before he could trust himself to talk.

It had happened as they approached the enemy coast, he said. They were flying the pathfinder plane, which drops a phosphorus smoke bomb to assemble the formation before proceeding to the target. On a B-29 this task is performed by the radio operator, back in the waist of the plane. At a signal from the pilot he releases the bomb through a narrow tube.

The radio operator on Simeral's plane was a chunky, red-haired youngster from Alabama, Staff Sgt. Henry Erwin. His crewmates liked to mimic his soft southern drawl, and he was always with a grin, always quiet and courteous. He received the routine order from Simeral, triggered the bomb and dropped it down the tube.

There was a malfunction. The bomb exploded in the tube and bounced back into Erwin's face, blinding both eyes and searing off an ear.

Phosphorus burns with a furious intensity that melts metal like butter. Now the bomb at Erwin's feet was eating its way rapidly through the deck of the plane, toward the full load of incendiaries in their racks below. He was alone; the navigator had gone up to the astrodome to get a star shot. There was no time to think. He picked up the white-hot bomb in his bare hands, and started forward to the cockpit, groping his way with elbows and feet.

The navigator's folding table was down and latched, blocking the narrow passageway. Erwin hugged the blazing bomb under an arm, feeling it devour the flesh on his ribs, unfastened the spring latch and lifted the table. (We inspected the plane later; the skin of his entire hand was seared onto the table.)

He stumbled on, a walking torch. His clothes, hair and flesh were ablaze.

The dense smoke had filled the airplane, and Simeral had opened the window beside him to clear the air. "I couldn't see Erwin," he told us, "but I heard his voice right at my elbow. He said —" Simeral paused a moment to steady his own voice. "He said, *'Pardon me, sir,'* and reached across to the window and tossed out the bomb. Then he collapsed on the flight deck." A fire extinguisher was turned on him, but the phosphorus still burned.

Simeral's instrument panel was obliterated by the smoke, and the plane was out of control. It was less than 300 feet off the water when he righted it. He called to the formation that he was aborting, jettisoned

his bombs and headed back to the field hospital at Iwo, three hours away. The crew applied first aid to Erwin, gave him plasma, smeared grease on his smoldering flesh. "He never lost consciousness, but he spoke only once the whole way back. He asked me —" Simeral took another drag on his cigarette. "'Is everybody else all right, sir?'"

At Iwo, he was still exhaling phosphorus smoke from his lungs, and his body had become so rigid that he had to be eased out through the window like a log. They carried him to the hospital. When they removed the unguent pads there and exposed his flesh to the air, it began to smolder again. The airplane flew on to Guam—with 11 men who would not be living save for the one they left behind.

Simeral finished talking. A young lieutenant looked at the holes in his right hand, where the phosphorus had spattered, and said tactlessly, "You ought to put in for a Purple Heart, Captain." Simeral, his control snapping, took a wild swing at him. Then the flight surgeon arrived and gave him a sedative, and led him away to have his burns treated.

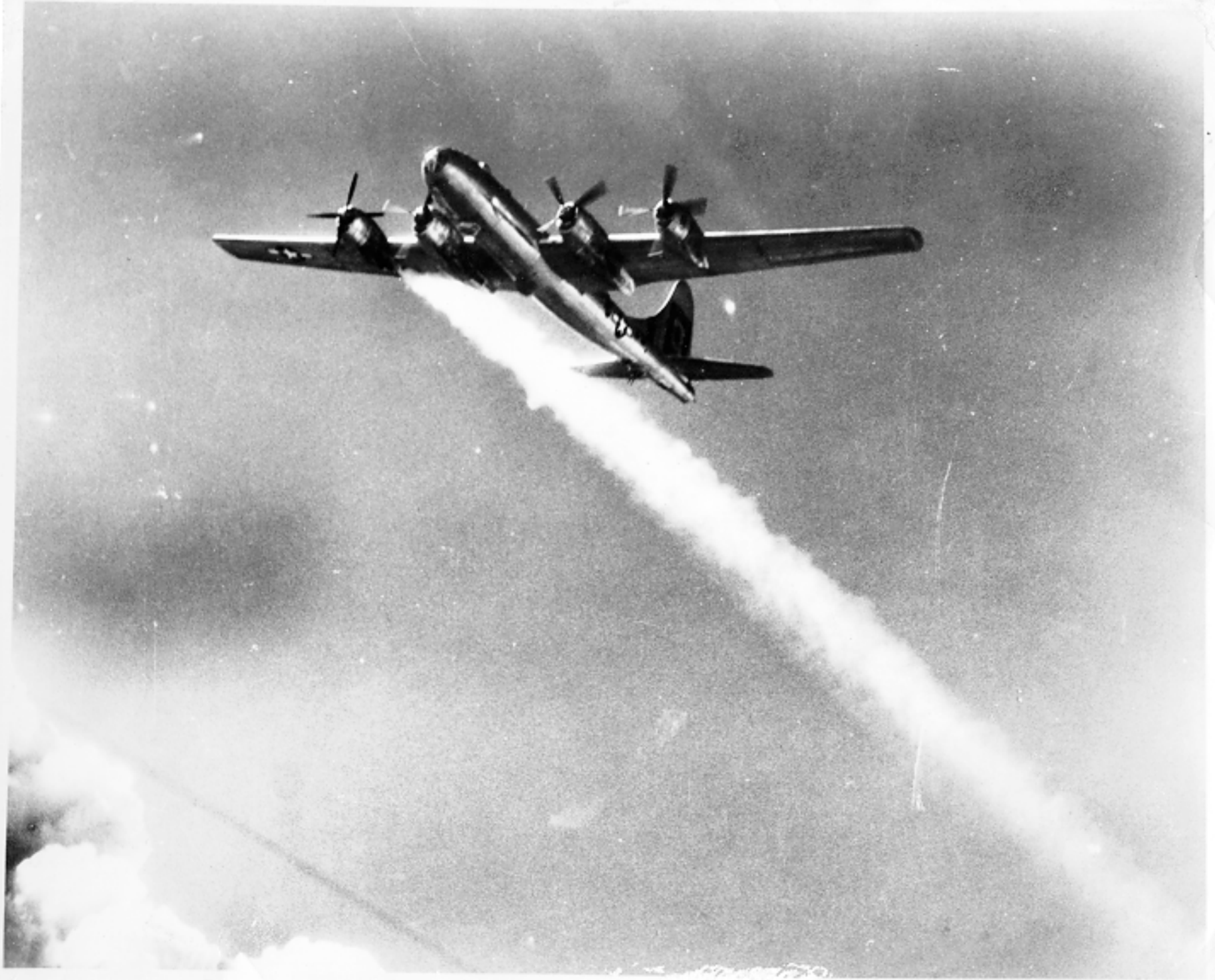
We spent the rest of the night writing up a recommendation for the Congressional Medal of Honor. It was simply worded. There was no need to speak of heroism and sacrifice; the facts were enough. It ended with the conventional military phrase: "Above and beyond the call of duty," but that seemed to express it pretty well. At five in the morning Colonel Storrie carried the single typewritten page to Air Force headquarters. Gen. Curtis LeMay was awakened. He read and signed it, and the recommendation was flashed to Washington. The reply arrived in record time: Approved.

Iwo reported that Sergeant Erwin was still alive, but no one could say how much longer he would survive. There was no Congressional Medal of Honor on Guam; the nearest was in Honolulu, and a special B-29 was dispatched to fly the Pacific to Hawaii.

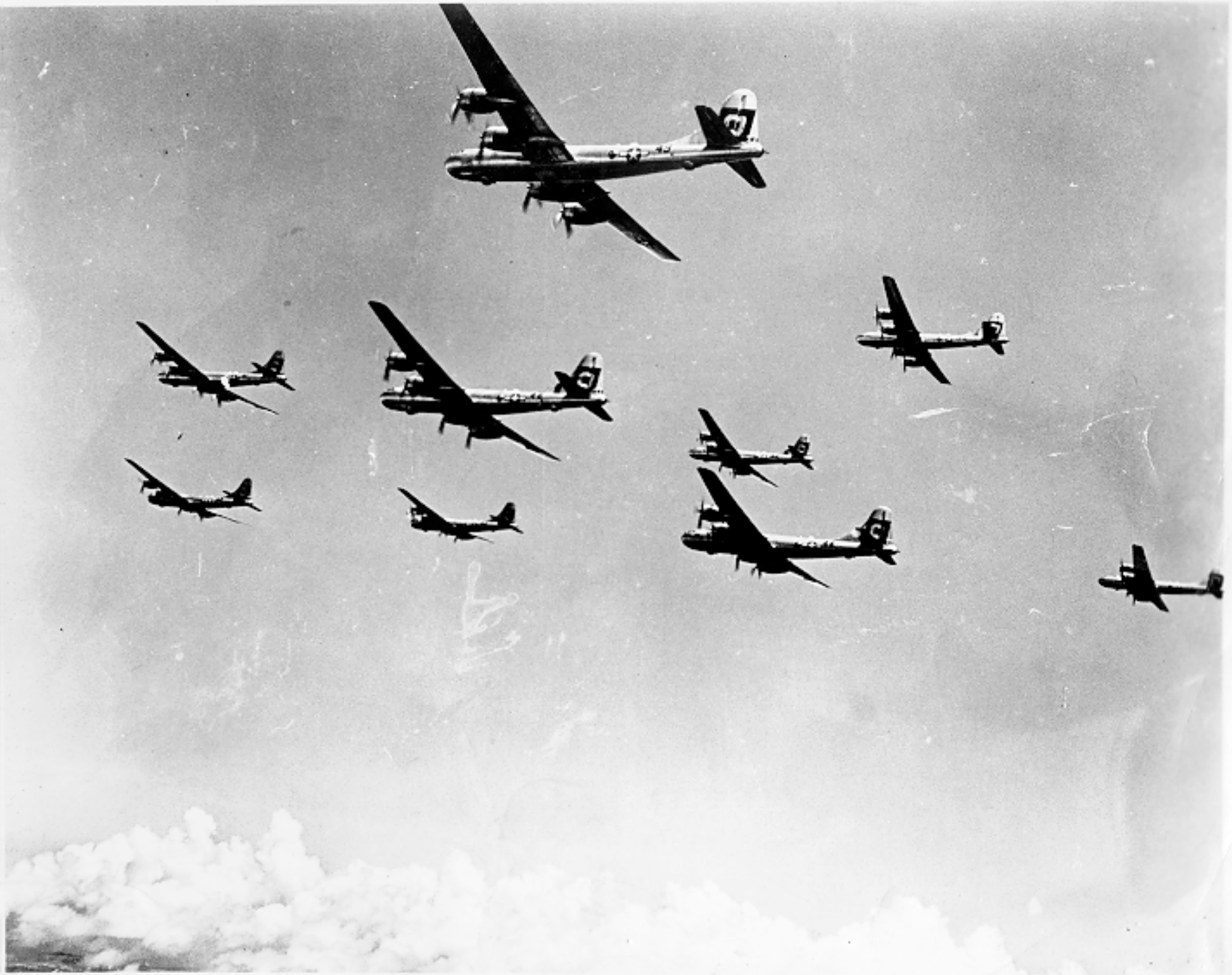
The medal was in a locked display case in Gen. Robert C. Richardson's headquarters, and the key was missing. They smashed the glass, took the medal from the case and sped back to Guam. General LeMay flew to Iwo and personally presented it to Sergeant Erwin, in a ceremony at his bedside. He repeated the final line about the call of duty, and Erwin said, "Thank you, sir."

Several years after the war I heard that Erwin was back in Alabama, happily married; he had regained the use of his hands and partial vision in one eye. I hope he can read over his citation now and then. I hope it gives him as much satisfaction as it gave me to write it.

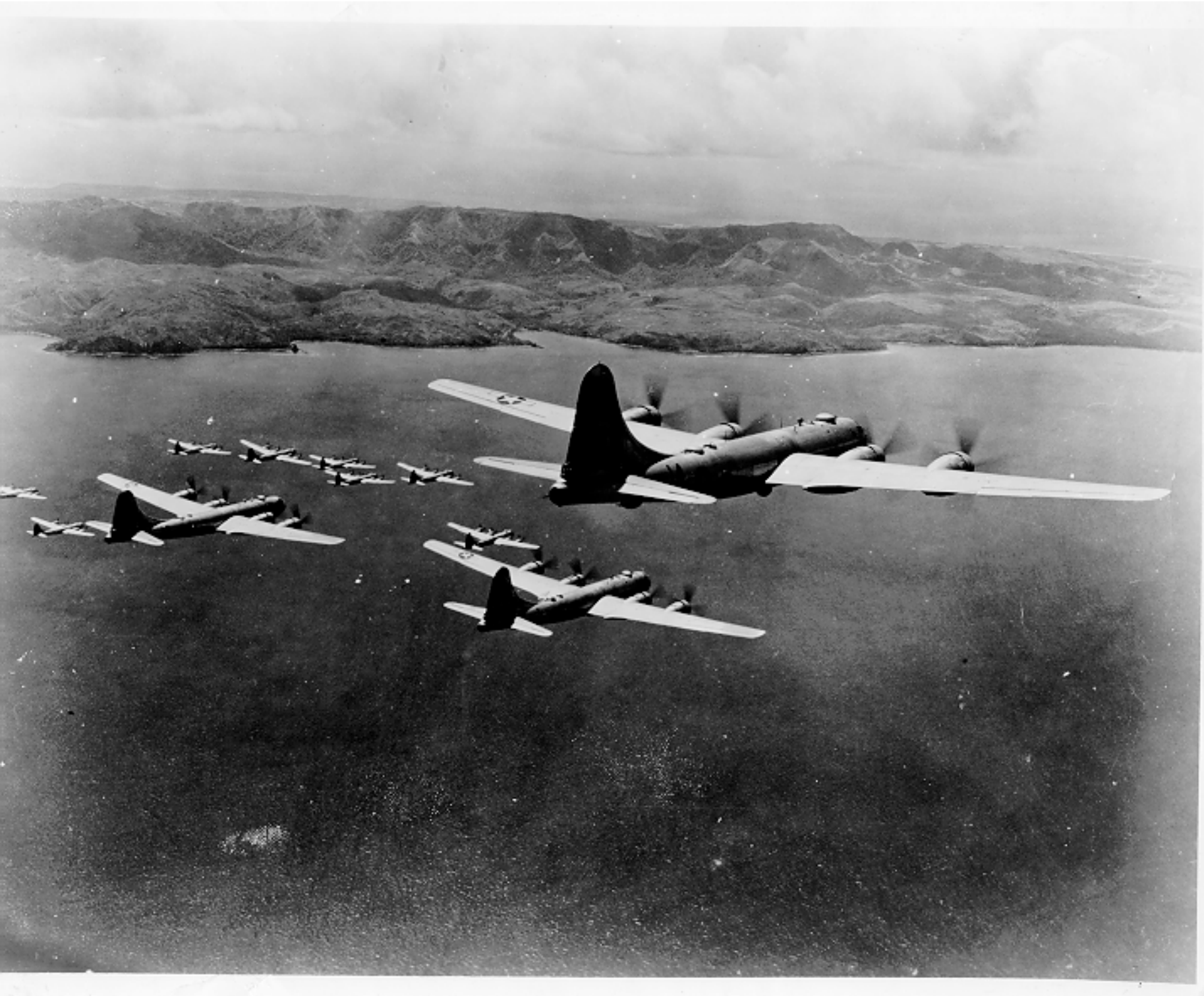
THE QUICKEST WAY to do many things is to do only one thing at a time. —*The Irish Digest*

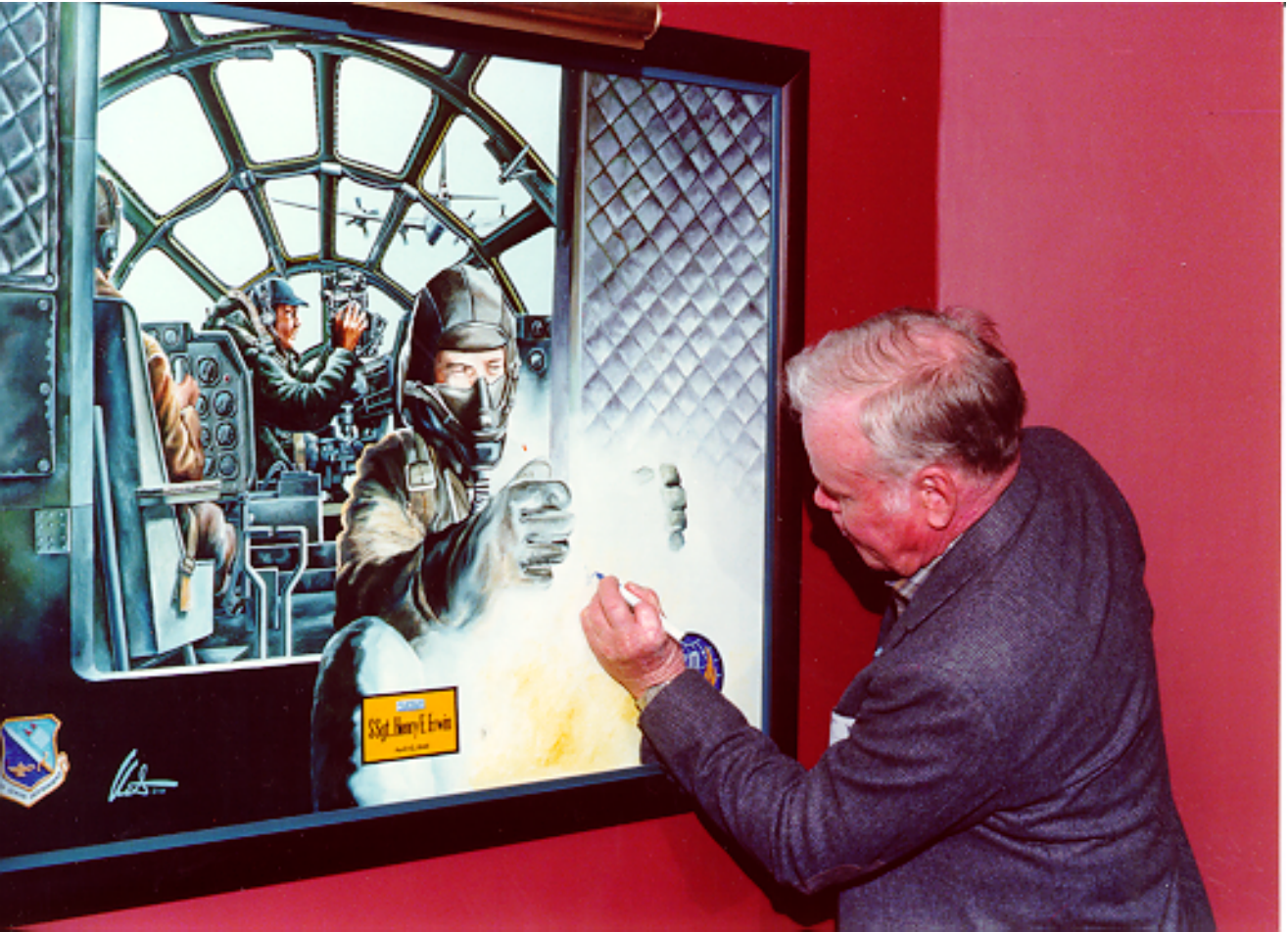


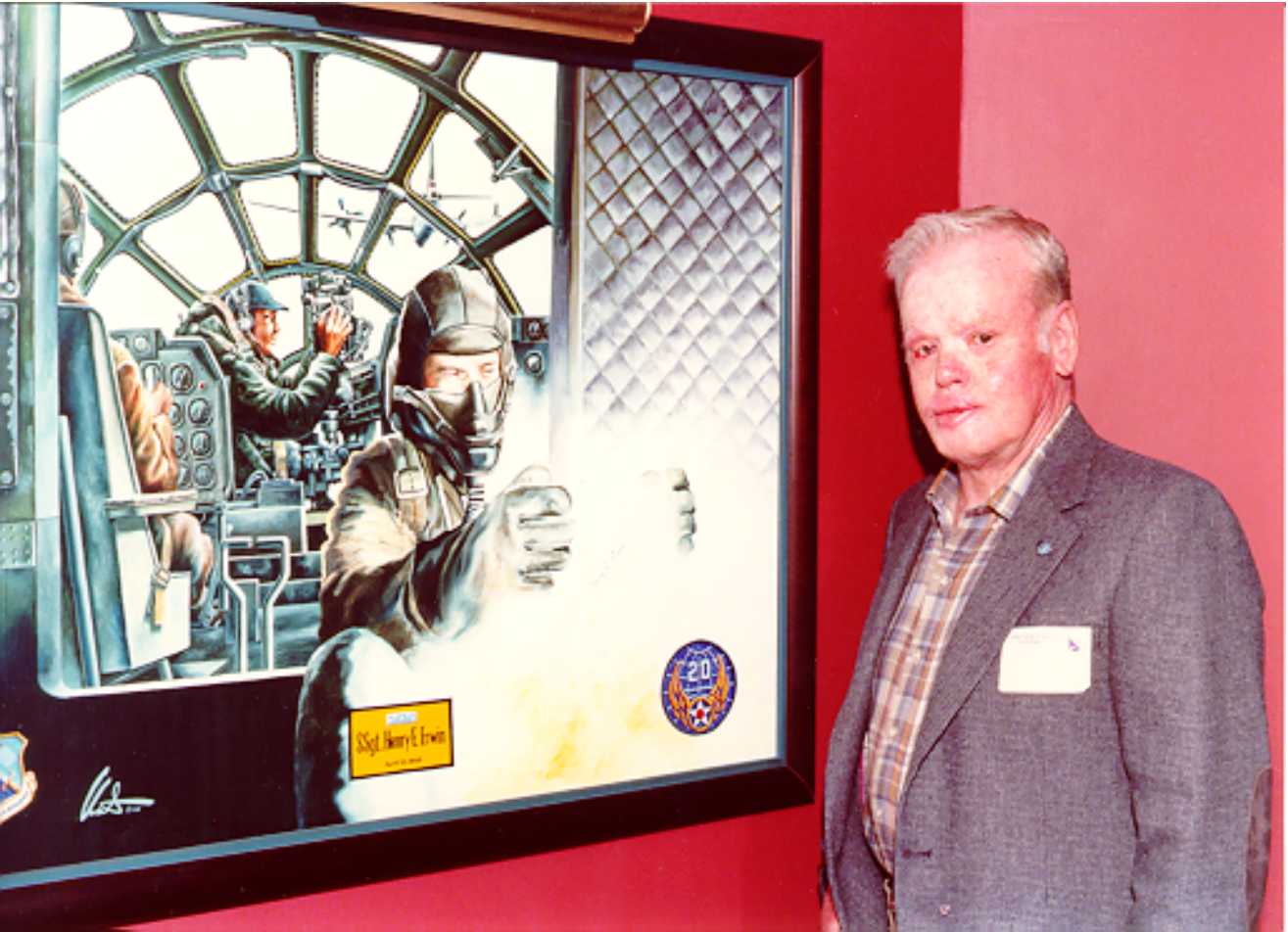

U.S.S. MISSOURI 10:30 SEPT. 2,'45




"Easy"
"Pete"
Easy's Aces




SSgt. Henry F. Erwin


SSgt. Henry E. Erwin